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THE MASKS OF OSCAR WILDE

by



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A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled The Masks of Oscar Wilde submitted by Ralph M. Melnychuk in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate how the motif of the mask plays a central role in Oscar Wilde's writings. The introduction provides a working definition of the mask and establishes the critical framework used. The first chapter is concerned with the artistic mask as developed in Wilde's aesthetical essays. The second chapter demonstrates how this artistic mask is used in The Picture of Dorian Gray. The last chapter discusses the development of the dandiacal mask in Wilde's comedies and considers the fusion of plot and theme into aphoristic style in The Importance of Being Earnest.



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ABBREVIATIONS

The following are abbreviations of the titles of those works of Oscar Wilde which are frequently referred to. The full title is used for all others.

DP	<u>De Profundis</u>
DL	<u>The Decay of Lying</u>
PPP	<u>Pen, Pencil and Poison</u>
CA	<u>The Critic as Artist</u>
TM	<u>The Truth of Masks</u>
SM	<u>The Soul of Man Under Socialism</u>
DG	<u>The Picture of Dorian Gray</u>
FS	<u>The Fisherman and his Soul</u>
BI	<u>The Birthday of the Infanta</u>
LWF	<u>Lady Windermere's Fan</u>
WNI	<u>A Woman of No Importance</u>
IH	<u>An Ideal Husband</u>
IBE	<u>The Importance of Being Earnest</u>

INTRODUCTION

One of the most striking characteristics of Oscar Wilde was his constant posing. He began his career in London by playing the dandy, apparently trying to live up to the image of himself created by the Punch cartoons. At times his writing betrays a tendency to be more "arty" than sincere; the desire to appear a poet seems more powerful than the impulse to actually become one. Consequently, the derivative nature of his writing tends, at times, to appear to be something of a put-on, as does his brilliant paradoxical wit, which has been frequently attacked as a clever but superficial mode of expression. Wilde himself seems to have, to a certain degree, courted the image of a superficial poseur. One of his plays, The Importance of Being Earnest, is sub-titled "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People". He frequently admits to his posing:

. . . to truth itself I gave what is false no less than what is true as its rightful providence and showed that the false and the true are merely forms of intellectual existence. I treated Art as the supreme reality and life as a mere mode of fiction: I woke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me: I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram.¹

Many critics, in fact, have considered Wilde as nothing more than this superficial poseur, both in his life and in his writings. Ruth Temple, for example, considers that his "ornate, veneered and trivial style" makes him a period piece "of a ridiculous period that he helped to make ridiculous."² Graham Hough is also hostile and claims that Wilde could not understand or appreciate his French sources. He considers Wilde's style superficial, plagiarized and second-rate bourgeois.³

Others, such as Eric Bentley, have tried to turn this so-called superficiality into a virtue, especially with reference to

The Importance of Being Earnest,⁴ while most critics accept the charge and ignore it where they feel Wilde is not superficial. Still others have felt that his posing represented a psychological fragmentation of Wilde's own personality.

In A Vision Yeats used Oscar Wilde as one of his examples of those who live in the nineteenth phase of the lunar cycle, the phase which marks the beginning of "the artificial, the abstract, the fragmentary, and the dramatic." The man of this phase is forced "to live in a fragment of himself and to dramatize that fragment." Arthur Symonds describes him as one who made for himself many souls "of intricate pattern and elaborate colour, webbed into indefinite tiny cells." Then he modifies the image: Wilde is not only a craftsman but also a skilled juggler who amuses people by whirling his separate "souls" before them. Later he uses yet another metaphor, clearing the theatre and making Wilde the only spectator of his own performance: "One sees that to him everything was drawn, all the rest of the world and himself as well; himself indeed always at once the protagonist and the lonely king watching the play in the theatre emptied for his pleasure."⁵

And Wilde himself, in The Picture of Dorian Gray, claims that insincerity is merely a method by which a person can multiply his personalities (DG 112).

Although even a sympathetic reader of Wilde must at times allow his superficiality, the key to understanding him is the realization that his posing is a manifestation of the search of a fragmented personality for the principle of unity. One can consider almost all Wilde's writing an exploration of the various facets of man's soul and the attempted creation of a harmonious personality of self. For Wilde felt that art and life were not separate -- that one must create the self out of the raw materials of the psyche in the same way that the poet creates a poem from the raw materials of experience. Wilde saw Christ as the perfectly united personality, and attempted to become Christ-like in an aesthetic sense. Christ was not a moralist but the supreme artist of life, who preached not

the denial of self but the creation of self through the rejection of all things which tend to pull the self apart.

Perhaps the best way of discussing Wilde's alternating divisive and synthetic tendencies is by the use of the term "masks." Wilde uses various personae, masks or poses, both in his life and in his writings, to explore different experiences and aspects of his own soul. That he is preoccupied with the concept of the mask is obvious from his constant references to it, and although he does not develop so well-defined a theory of masks as Yeats, his aesthetical essays lay a foundation for their use in his "creative" works. It is possible, then, to discuss Wilde's use of the mask without psychoanalyzing the personality of Wilde himself.

A mask is a curious device. It can be used to hide behind, or it can be used to reveal something not otherwise obvious. Wilde approaches the problem of masks from the disparity he sees between the self and the constricting attachment to obsolete norms and ideals. The mask becomes an instrument for freeing the mind from such fixed attachments, for by increasing the number of masks one wears, one increases the number of types of experiences one can encounter. However, unless the self and the mask can somehow merge, the whole process is insignificant. One is reminded of the injunction of St. Paul to put off the old man and put on the new. If one did not totally become the "new" man, but merely put on the appearance of one, the estranged state of disparity between the true self and the appearance would cause even further fragmentation. St. Paul demands a total metamorphosis, as apparently does Yeats with his concept of cyclical reincarnation. Wilde, however, had trouble working out this problem artistically.

At this point it would be valuable to clarify exactly what is meant by the terms mask and persona. Erving Goffman in The Presenta-

tion of Self in Everyday Life, discusses the various types of masks or poses which people normally adopt. He observes that the expectations aroused by one's relationship, professional or otherwise, to a given community, cause the individual to adopt a certain mode of behavior which will conform to these expectations. A waitress will behave in a certain manner toward her customers, who expect her behavior to be smooth, polished and efficient, in another toward her fellow workers, who expect certain attitudes toward the job, and in yet another when away from the restaurant. This sort of mask, completely governed by externals, was certainly not what Wilde had in mind.

The more mechanical people, to whom life is a shrewd speculation dependent on a careful calculation of ways and means, always know where they are going, and go there. They start with the desire of being the Parish Beadle, and, in whatever sphere they are placed, they succeed in being the Parish Beadle and no more. A man whose desire is to be something separate from himself, to be a Member of Parliament, or a successful grocer, or a prominent solicitor, or a judge, or something equally tedious, invariably succeeds in being what he wants to be. That is his punishment. Those who want a mask have to wear it. (DP 934)

On the other hand, Wilde is not merely using the device of the literary persona, although in certain of his works it is useful to consider that he does. Barbara Charlesworth divides Wilde's writing into three masks or personae, those of Basil Hallward, Lord Henry Wotton, and Dorian Gray. She then considers that all the essays of Intentions were spoken through the mask of Lord Henry, "not so much for the ideas expressed in them as for the way in which they are expressed: the pose of the writer, or of the main speaker in the dialogues, is in all of them that of the detached ironist, the aristocratic observer."⁶ That Wilde is an ironist and frequently uses an ironic persona cannot be denied, but the equation between Lord Henry and the principal speakers of Intentions cannot be made, as Miss Charlesworth notes, on the grounds of content. Nevertheless, because of its obvious relationship to Wilde's writings, I should like briefly to examine the concept of the literary

persona, especially the ironic persona, in the hope that such an examination will help formulate a definition of the mask.

When one speaks of the ironic persona or narrator, one immediately thinks of Chaucer and The Canterbury Tales. One could perhaps make a case for claiming that Chaucer's pilgrims are all masks of Chaucer. Chaucer has chosen his pilgrims from many walks of life, and, given the Medieval significance of the pilgrimage and the common spiritual symbol of life being a pilgrimage, one can see Chaucer exploring, through his characters, different experiences and sensations. What holds the framework of the Tales together is the ironical narrator and the somewhat stupid and clumsy host. The ironical implications of the pilgrim Chaucer reporting a tale written by the poet Chaucer but allegedly formulated and narrated by another supposedly real pilgrim become very complex. Chaucer's pose, here and elsewhere, is that of the shy, ignorant and somewhat detached poet, and his irony consists in an amusing juxtaposition between this humble man and the expectations aroused by his subject matter. Although Chaucer never violates a sense of decorum, the reader can still laugh at clerics who behave like clowns and at barnyard animals engaged in an epic pursuit of a fox and rooster. Some of the tales are beautiful and obviously serious, but the reader is most struck by the personality of the detached chronicler who, in his humble way, is a large enough man to laugh at the follies and absurdities of human existence and behavior -- both those of his fellow man and his own. It is only in the retractions that Chaucer puts his ironic mask aside to reveal a man struggling along his own pilgrimage through life, unsure if his involvement with his own creations will merit for him the salvation he desires.

What is most important for my purposes, however, is the intricacy of the various ironic levels in Chaucer. Chaucer writes so that any episode in The Canterbury Tales can be seen from at least three nar-

rative perspectives. The function of any persona is to create a perspective, and the function of an ironic persona always involves a sense of contrived confusion as to what that perspective really is. This perhaps can be seen more clearly in the case of Swift.

Swift uses irony as a satiric device, but it must be remembered that his devices grow out of his vision of the disparity between reality and expectation. The types of fictitious authors used by Swift vary from the detached observer of Of the Education of Ladies to the deceived benevolence of the narrator of A Modest Proposal, and ultimately end in the mad delusions of Gulliver. After discussing Swift's rhetorical dissimulation in the first of these, Bullitt suggests the complexity of the narrative perspective present in Swift's major satire:

Instead of dramatizing himself as an observer meticulously and often ingenuously noting the folly of mankind, he dramatizes this folly in action. That is, Swift relinquished his role as commentator and his satire becomes an imitation, in the classic sense, of what he means to condemn. In short, Swift's most powerful satires exemplify dramatic irony and appeal to an intellectualized concept of irony more profound than mere rhetorical dissimulation . . . In irony of this kind, it is a situation and the character's part in that situation which create irony. The character enjoys the felicitous "Possession of being well deceived" by appearances while remaining blissfully ignorant of the situation. At the same time, the spectator apprehends both the appearance and the reality and knows how the actor ought to be responding. In Swift's satire, the character's "ignorance" is generally of a particular kind: he is ignorant of the correct evaluation of his own moral nature.⁷

The operation of this sort of ironic persona is probably most clearly seen in A Modest Proposal. The narrator here sees himself as humane and benevolent. It is the unconsciousness of his brutality which creates the horror of the work, for the narrator is unable to see that he has failed to distinguish human beings from brute animals. Only in two places does the mask drop to the level of the detached observer, once while referring to Irish landlords and once referring

to the desire of an unnamed nation (England) to eat Ireland, but these "slips" serve to control the focus of the attack and, without destroying the persona, make it clear exactly where the position of the reader should be with respect to that persona.

In the last book of Gulliver's Travels, however, the collusion between the implied author and the reader breaks down, as two and one-half centuries of Swift scholarship demonstrate. Swift toys with Gulliver's proud and arrogant ignorance throughout the work, notably in Book II, but in Book IV Gulliver's pride is destroyed and replaced, not by a humble recognition of man's faults and failings, but by a total despair resulting from Gulliver's equation of man and Yahoo.

Like Chaucer, Swift also uses the persona to obtain, for the reader, the possibility of a multiple perspective. The satire is thus simultaneously directed, say in A Modest Proposal, at the speaker, representing a certain attitude, the English, the Irish gentry, and the perversity of mankind in general. The persona can also cause a confusion in the mind of the reader as to the attitude he should take toward the satire, as in Gulliver's Travels. It must be noted, however, that the persona exists to fill a technical function, and that its personality is unimportant except in that it underlines the satiric or comic objectives of the work as a whole.

In the nineteenth century, the use of the persona became popular in the form of the dramatic monologue. With the increasing relativism of philosophical thought, the use of varied personae became a method of exploring various forms of experience. Browning, for example, often made a case for the apparently immoral position, and the dramatic monologue, since it required of the reader at least some element of sympathy with the speaker, was an excellent vehicle for this. Browning, as Baudelaire and Pater, came to the conclusion

that ultimate truth or reality existed only in the "moment" of experience, and the persona provided a vehicle for examining this "moment" from another perspective. The mask or persona becomes a method of objectifying an experience, allowing the author to lose himself in this experience, without necessarily becoming publicly committed to it.

I have now examined two types of mask -- the social "front" brought about by the expectations of society concerning the individual, and the persona, which has the purely literary function of altering or developing one or more perspectives in a given piece of writing. In the theorizing of Yeats, these two aspects of the mask merge and in his later work are expanded into a part of his spiritual system. Yeats was conscious of the fragmentation of the personality, and many of his early writings show a conflict between two personalities or characters, each of whom could be taken to be Yeats himself. A basically shy and retiring man who forced himself into public life, he was very conscious of the resulting mask which, to some extent, hid his true nature. In one sense, "the mask includes all the differences between one's own and other people's conception of one's personality."⁸ Thus the mask can be defensive, protecting the self from too close contact with the not-self, or it can be a weapon of attack, for "we put it on to keep up a noble conception of ourselves, it is a heroic ideal which we try to live up to." Yeats then used the mask in examining the problem of identity, probing the relationship between reality and the dream or imaginative vision. Yeats also owes much to the Japanese Noh mask:

The effect of these masks is to isolate, with chill distinction and an entire absence of superfluous emotion, the salient characteristics of manhood and womanhood, youth and age. They are intended in the first place, to enforce an atmosphere of sculptural "stillness" and to impose the author's visual conception of his character upon the actors.⁹

The mask, then, reveals as it conceals. It may conceal the true self, but it reveals characteristics or modes of that self to the audience. The major problem, however, is the relationship between the mask and the face, the segment of personality and the whole self, the illusion and the reality -- since one is dealing only with more or less intensified masks. Yeats tries to solve this by turning the mask into a symbol and relating that symbol to his spiritual system. Other writers, such as Max Beerbohm in The Happy Hypocrite, have made the face become the mask. Wilde, however, not having the spiritual depth of Yeats, and obviously more sensitive than Beerbohm, is unable to resolve this problem. He uses the mask to illustrate the fragmentation of personality and the search for integration, but is unable to discover this integration except in the person of Christ.

In the light of the above discussion, one can define the mask as a device used by a writer to create a personality or character that speaks for him. It differs from a fictional character by often acting as a spokesman, and from a narrative persona in that it is often not the narrator, and that it is possible to have more than one mask operating simultaneously in a given work. It is also to be distinguished from allegory, for although allegory may split the personality into fragments, the characters are important as fragments and not as a whole. The mask, however, presents at least the façade of a whole personality, although that personality may not necessarily be artistically satisfactory. The mask also differs from the ironic persona in that it serves a psychological rather than a purely technical purpose, although it may have a technical role also. And I would make the further stipulation, in Wilde's case, that the mask is a device used to explore the different aspects of the fragmented personality.

Although many critics have noted the importance of the Wildean mask, few, if any, have actually used the mask as a critical touchstone for examining Wilde's total aesthetic. Bayley notes the theoretical importance of the mask in Wilde's literary milieu, with special reference to Yeats. Bentley suggests that Wilde's bohemianism was a mask and a way of coping with modern life, as was Nietzsche's mask. Barbara Charlesworth, as previously noted, considers the whole Wilde canon as a manifestation of three masks. Her analysis, however, is superficial in that for her the three masks become simply a convenient way of discussing Wilde in terms of three basic attitudes, and thus have little inherent significance in themselves. Ojala is not particularly concerned with the mask except as a manifestation of decadent Narcissism, the latter being, for him, the key to Wilde. Roditi seems unconcerned with the mask and spends most of his time worrying about Wilde's morality. Woodcock approaches Wilde from the point of view of the paradox and ignores the affinity between paradox and mask.

Ellmann perhaps comes closest to a realization of the importance of the Wildean mask. His work on Wilde is rather fragmentary, but gives one the impression that he believes that Wilde viewed the mask as a sort of symbol of artistic detachment, as a stylistic symbol of the way in which the artist encounters any sort of experience. Like Ellmann, San Juan also recognizes the intrinsic importance of the mask. He is primarily interested in the psychological revelation of character, the unmasking process, and except for the chapter on poetry he relegates the mask to being one element among many to be considered. He sees dandyism as a philosophy in its own right, unlike Ganz who considers the dandiacal nature of the comedies as a mask for one segment of Wilde's own personality.

While it is certainly possible to look at Wilde from a number of critical points of view, it is my contention that one of the most obvious approaches, that of the mask, has been largely neglected. The remainder of this thesis, then, will consist of an examination of the Wildean mask. The first chapter will discuss the philosophical framework Wilde establishes in Intentions, for it is in Intentions that Wilde reveals his theory of artistic perception which, for him, makes the mask one of the few practical devices for coping with either reality or imaginative sensibility.

I

THE MASK AND THE MAN

If there is one principle which sums up Wilde's aesthetic, it is that art is the supreme and perhaps the only mode of perception. Speaking about Yeats, Bayley says that "one of the assumptions of the mask is that poetry and life are indivisible, that ways of behaving in life are the same as ways of writing in poetry, and that therefore art may and should have a deep effect on action."¹ Richard Ellmann discusses this problem of the artistic mask more fully:

Wilde's discovery of the mask reflected in part his uneasiness with his private life, and it also brought into England, in portable though misleading form, the symbolist doctrine that the artist approaches the real world as circuitously as a detective attempting to piece together from inadequate evidence an almost unfathomable crime. The doctrine reaches a subtler exposition in Wilde's younger compatriot, Yeats, who perceived that the mask was a useful figure for the way the mind constantly transforms its atmosphere and is itself altered, in a reciprocal process of conversion. In Wilde's more simplified form, the interest does not lie in the esthetic theory, which is perhaps no more than a taste for varied self-expression with hieratic sanction, but rather in that for him the doctrine of the mask is itself a mask. His theme is not as he supposes, the divorce of art from life, but its inescapable arraignment by experience in spite of all those witty protests he makes, in full awareness of their futility.²

One must remember that Wilde's essays are really essays in epistemology, specifically that branch of epistemology which deals with perception:

They [scientists] have discovered the secret of modern science, which is the acceptance of the instability of knowledge. If an orientation is useful, it is capable of being changed as the world changes, and the world changes as the way we look at it changes. "Nature," said Oscar Wilde "imitates art," As our artists change the way they paint sunsets, so we see sunsets in a different way.³

Wilde apparently derived the notion of nature imitating art from Whistler, but his whole approach bears certain marked affinities to some of Nietzsche's statements in Beyond Good and Evil. According to Nietzsche, the search for absolute truth postulates a value judgement that the true is more valuable than the false -- a judgement of which Nietzsche questions the validity. He emphasizes that there is no absolute truth (not even the unity of the self), and that a philosophical framework does not explain the world but merely places it in a personally convenient logical structure. Ultimately, all philosophical systems are the result of the moral principles of the philosophers, and those systems have been evolved to justify those principles. Nietzsche consequently deplores the lack of a workable distinction between metaphysics and ethics, although he implies that since metaphysics is an impossible science, perhaps this confusion can never be eliminated. Nietzsche is also obsessed with masks, suggesting that philosophy, and in fact all words, are really masks, and that the great man who perceives behind these masks is still condemned to wear one in this world. Wilde makes a similar statement in The Truth of Masks when he says that "the truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks" (TM 1078).

Wilde's appreciation of the relativity of knowledge comes through again and again in his essays. In The Decay of Lying Vivian says that he is prepared to prove anything, and The Truth of Masks concludes as follows:

There is much in this essay with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realise Hegel's system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks. (TM 1078)

Further, in The Critic as Artist Wilde defines truth in religion as "simply the opinion that has survived," in science as the "ultimate sensation" and in art as "one's last mood" (CA 1047). In turning to art as the be-all and end-all to explain the human condition, and in rejecting the mundane facts of everyday life, Wilde is really saying that no approach to the problem of existence is true, but at least art has the merit of being beautiful, and perhaps through the Beautiful one can gain some sort of vision of the True. Ellmann says:

Even the exaggerations of Wilde's essays have since his death come to seem more characteristic and less wilful. The doctrines of estheticism as he formulated them are more than clever overstatements of his school. They stem from need as well as caprice, for they constitute an exoneration. To consider life wasteful and disorderly is nothing new, but to go on to disengage the artist utterly from life, to make him omnipotent, imperturbable, divinely free, is to evolve not an esthetic theory but an image of regeneration. Assumptions which are usefully comic Wilde tries to shape into a half-serious esthetic; all that is real is obnoxious and ugly; insincerity improves upon sincerity, lies upon repulsive truth; to brush aside the circumstances of one's life is to become pure. We put on our masks (and Wilde was the first writer in English to dwell upon the truth of masks) to be absolved of an unbearable burden, our lives. "In so vulgar an age as this we all need masks," he writes in a letter of 1894. "The only beautiful things are the things that do not concern us," Wilde had himself say and would like himself to believe. This desire to be insulated from real emotion, this nostalgia for aplomb, levels life into whatever we have contempt for or anxiety about, and makes art the place where our thin skins turn to marble.⁴

Wilde himself puts the case better:

When one looks back upon the life that was so vivid in its emotional intensity, and filled with such fervent moments of ecstasy or of joy, it all seems to be a dream and an illusion. What are the unreal things, but the passions that once burned one like fire? (CA 1035)

He goes on to say that this is not the case with art, where by picking up a copy of Dante one can relive any particular experience or sensation one desires.

For a closer examination of his aesthetical doctrines, it is

important to remember that Wilde was a member of the so-called Aesthetic movement in England and also that he was a very derivative writer. Few of his ideas are original, and most are lifted out of the critical mainstream of the age. Wilde is not, however, merely a repository of nineteenth century ideas, for he gave to these ideas, in line with his own critical principles, a new and highly original form.⁵

The Aesthetic movement valued all experience for its own sake, and thus developed a relationship between aesthetics and hedonism. It also had a tendency (illustrated in the skepticism and subjectivism characteristic of the movement) to leave out the object experienced and value only the experience itself. In Aestheticism the cult of beauty always attached itself to the visible world and not to such ethereal regions of the ideal as appear in Plato's contemplations of the Beautiful, the Good, and the True. "Being at once something sensual and intellectual, Beauty is not sought in contents but in form. Morality becomes irrelevant -- ultimate value resides in the beauty alone -- and presumably the truly beautiful will also be good."⁶ The movement was also characterized by an extreme individualism in sharp contrast to the growing social and political collectivist schools of thought:

In summary then, the theory of art for art's sake rests fundamentally on a conception of necessary and valid differences of personality and its expression. So far as art goes, it assumes that each person, provided he has the artist's gifts, is entitled to create for himself and by himself for the mere pleasure of creation; it assumes also that each of these works of art must be independent and self-subsistent. For the preserving and guarding of his imaginative conceptions or visions, and for the bringing of them into being, he alone is responsible. Not only must he reject assistance, but he must devote himself to the task, neither slighting it nor scanting the performance. The form that gives his conception existence is his sole aim, the object of his labor, the goal of his endeavours. Once the end is achieved, his work of art must take its place among the things of Beauty, giving its particular joy to those fitted to appreciate it.⁷

Such theoreticians as Pater and Ruskin were somewhat uneasy about placing all their eggs in the evaluation basket of form. Ruskin developed a moral aesthetic and Pater, though espousing the impressionist doctrine, evolved a conception more similar to the very spiritual "still point of the turning world" of Eliot rather than the more sensualist ideas of the so-called decadent writers:

Yet he [Pater] must have sensed within himself something of the same desire for synthesis that had made Rossetti and Swinburne distrustful of a thorough-going art for art's sake comparable to Gautier's and had repeatedly brought them back, sometimes almost reluctantly, to the "moral aesthetic" of Ruskin. In nineteenth century French literature, more surely perhaps than in England, he could discern the plight of modern man unable to assimilate or interpret the new knowledge crowding in upon the consciousness, and so more and more completely lost in a universe of unfamiliar fact and half-understood conjecture. Though he sought a certain ethical integration of his own thought and sense experience, he perceived everywhere in the culture of his age the strongest inducement towards a nonmoral view of life and a narrowly specialized concept of art. At a time when the natural scientist was proclaiming his right to dismiss moral concern as irrelevant to his research and spiritual sanction as unknowable, the artist might all too readily find in the physical world, the world of predestined matter, not the source of a Swinburnian optimism, but a mere blank denial of the human values which a less "scientific" generation had deemed essential to art. So disillusioned, he might, said Pater, quite understandably turn in upon himself, where "in the narrow cell of its own subjective experience, the action of a powerful nature would be intense but exclusive and peculiar." Under such circumstances, the "vocation of the artist, of the student of life or books, would be realized with something -- say! of fanaticism, as an end in itself, unrelated, unassociated," and his work would be inevitably distorted, "exaggerated, in matter of form, or both, as in Hugo or Baudelaire." For the health and balance of great art necessarily demanded of the artist what Pater, reverting to the language of the high Victorians, came to call "that sense of large proportion in things, that all-embracing prospect of life as whole."⁸

In De Profundis Wilde defines his relation to the age in terms of his acceptance of life as complex and relative. Thus he unites in his writings the Victorian concern for evaluating the effects of an

increasingly complex culture and area of knowledge with a subjective impressionism which tended, to some extent, to react against this increasing cultural and intellectual complexity, and which saw knowledge as relative to the individual and the unique experiences of the individual. From Wilde's own viewpoint, the sources of his vision are immaterial -- what matters is the form and personal vitality he can give to it.

From one point of view, it is this extreme individuality of Wilde's position which is the philosophical basis for his aesthetic theory. At the risk of doing violence to the subtlety of his thought, I wish to reduce Wilde's theory to a series of four basic premises:

1. If the individual personality is supreme, then nature imitates art.
2. If nature imitates art, then all art is a lie.
3. If all art is a lie, then the critical faculty is just as creative as the artistic faculty.
4. If the critical faculty is just as creative as the artistic faculty, one must conclude that the only possible mode of perception is through a mask.

In other words, the doctrine of the supremacy of the individual dictates the relativist doctrine that nature is not something which exists in itself but is rather the sum of all the ways in which one is conscious. The work of art, then, provides a new method of being aware or perceiving, and hence moves toward nature rather than from it. If this is the case, art has no prior connection with so-called reality, and hence is a lie. If art is a lie, then the important thing is its form, and hence the critical or ordering faculty, whether stimulated by apparent reality or by another work of art, is really what is creative. And in the act of ordering, the critical faculty is providing a mask through which what it is ordering can

be perceived. This summary is obviously antithetical to Wilde's style, but it is my contention that Wilde does move through such a process, even if he does not overtly state the final conclusion.

Although all his writings bear the same marks, De Profundis and The Soul of Man Under Socialism perhaps best illustrate Wilde's extreme individualism and the dependence of his aesthetical approach on such a doctrine. For example, The Soul of Man advocates a system, if one can call it that, in which man will be free to live and to develop his personality. The degree of seriousness with which the work is written is hard to determine, for it certainly is not a defence or advocacy of any known brand of socialism. Wilde certainly does advocate the elimination of private property, but for the Christian reason that property, the accumulation of it and the concern caused by it, hinders true self-growth. Wilde is careful, however, not merely to hand over property to the state, for he claims that under the present system at least some people have the opportunity for self-development, while if one replaces economic tyranny with political tyranny, the last state of man will be worse than the first. If property and tyranny are both eliminated, we shall have, says Wilde, a true, beautiful and healthy individualism.

Ojala relates this intense individualism to the very nature of the Aesthetic movement, and notes the predominance of the myth of Narcissus, the archetypal individualist, in the writings of the movement:

To sum up the psychological characteristics of aestheticism we should like to say that there is something static and Narcissistic about it. Heinz Matlacher sees in Narcissus the most perfect symbol of the static, as against Faust, which figure in his opinion is the most ideal avatar of the dynamic. He points out that Narcissus becomes popular "in the epoques of weakened vitality," as e.g. in the decadent period in the nineteenth century. Sigmund Freud again associates idealism, in the sense of an "ascetic" life attitude, with Narcissism. He writes upon the latter and its idealistic strivings

as follows: "To this ideal ego is now directed the self love which the real ego enjoyed in childhood. The narcissism seems to be now displaced on to this new ideal ego, which, like the infantile ego, deems itself the possessor of all perfections." If the prototype of the dandy, "the last flash of heroism in an age of decadence," may be said to be the ideal of aestheticism, so we may add that the lonely Narcissus, looking in a melancholy way at his own image, was the symbol of its soul.⁹

The truth of this observation with reference to Wilde is best illustrated by one of his most haunting prose poems, "The Disciple", which gives the myth of Narcissus a particularly perverse Wildean twist.

When Narcissus died the pool of his pleasure changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, and the Oreads came weeping through the woodland that they might sing to the pool and give it comfort.

And when they saw that the pool had changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, they loosened the green tresses of their hair and cried to the pool and said, "We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he."

"But was Narcissus beautiful?" said the pool.

"Who should know that better than you?" answered the Oreads. "Us did he ever pass by, but you he sought for, and would lie on your banks and look down at you, and in the mirror of your waters he would mirror his own beauty."

And the pool answered, "But I loved Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored." (864)

I wish to postpone a further discussion of individualism until my treatment of the final development of Wilde's theories. However, one must remember that the central element in Wilde's approach, the premise that nature imitates art, is basically relativist, and as such postulates the predominance of individual personality over any absolutes of knowledge.

Wilde's basic premise, and his most apparently startling one, is that nature imitates art rather than vice versa. This proposition

works on a number of levels. Nature, as Wilde sees it, is not beneficent, and at best is indifferent to man, if not overtly hostile. Also, Wilde, along with the nineteenth century as a whole, was well aware that one's conception of the essence of nature is altered by the multiplicity of different ways in which nature can be viewed. Such a relativist tendency makes it impossible for Wilde to find any absolutes in nature. The Good and the True consequently have no existence in the real world of facts, and one can say the same of the Beautiful. The concept of Beauty postulates order, and nature, says Wilde, is deficient in form. It is this deficiency, not any harmony, that stimulates art. "If Nature had been comfortable, mankind would never have invented architecture," says Wilde (DL 970). An escape into a Platonic world of forms is obviously meaningless, for such an escape postulates the very absolutes one finds lacking.

The only absolute, then, is the individual personality and the experiences and sensations that that personality undergoes. Though knowledge of the object may be complex and confused, and a metaphysical system which explains the object impossible, one is still faced with the sensations one experiences by apparent contact with objects. The greatest man, therefore, develops new modes of perception, uses these new modes to develop his own personality by experiencing new sensations, and strives for the unity which comes from developing all the potentialities of his personality. It is the artist's job to discover these new modes of perception and to give them form, so that they may be appreciated and experienced.

If we take Nature to mean natural simple instinct as opposed to self-conscious culture, the work produced under this influence is always old-fashioned, antiquated, and out of date. One touch of Nature may make the whole world kin, but two touches of Nature will destroy any work of Art. If, on the other hand, we regard Nature as the collection of phenomena external to man, people only discover in her what they bring to her. She has no suggestions of

her own. Wordsworth went to the lakes, but he was never a lake poet. He found in the stones the sermons he had already hidden there. (DL 977)

In a very real sense, then, there were no sunsets in England before Turner, for no Englishmen were able to perceive sunsets in the same way that they could after Turner. The artist simply teaches us how to see.

In his discussion of mimetic, pragmatic, and expressive theories of literary criticism, Abrams suggests that the Romantic sensibility is characterized by an emphasis on the poet rather than on the objective universe outside the poet or on the poet's audience. Poetry becomes a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" rather than an attempt to imitate nature or an attempt to teach and delight the reading public. Wilde's theories can be seen as an extension of this Romantic perspective. The imagination for people like Wordsworth and Coleridge was not mere fancy, the mental ability to create something unreal (like a unicorn) out of the elements found in reality, nor was it the imagination of the Enlightenment, a power to see beyond the superficial confusion of phenomena to the laws of order and cause which governed the world. Rather, while certainly creative, it organized the world with form derived from within, not reasoned from without.

The power of the new perception is that it can see both order and disorder in experience without claiming that one or the other is the true character of reality. This is the orientation Coleridge symbolizes in "Kubla Khan", in which Kubla's paradisaical garden includes both beauty and terror, both sun and ice. To Coleridge, the imagination was the power to experience the reconciliation of opposites without emptying them of their contradictions and disparities. And Keats, learning from both Wordsworth and Coleridge, saw the poetic power as the power of "negative capability," the power not to make up your mind in the face of logical contradictions but to maintain those contradictions. Such notions clearly make it possible for the poet to engage his mind with reality in all its contra-

dictory and confusing concreteness; like Wordsworth, he felt that here is our home, not in some lost paradise or future heaven. To Wordsworth the imagination is an adaptive power, and his theme is how that imaginative power grows, how it is destroyed, and how it is restored. His subject is not nature but psychology.¹⁰

Wilde takes this psychological perspective one step further by suggesting that art not only shows us the mind of the artist, but also creates types of beauty which life then imitates. This idea is basically a variant of the old teach-and-delight theory but without the moral overtones. Beauty implies the addition of form, and when life sees the perfection of form in art, it imitates it. "Beauty has as many meanings as a man has moods'. Beauty is the symbol of symbols, Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery-colored world" (CA 1030). This leads naturally into Wilde's next major point, that art is a lie -- the telling of beautiful, untrue things. Here again, he can be considered in the tradition of Sidney, who said that "nature's world is brazen, only the poets can deliver a golden." The imagination takes nature and its possibilities, and, does not imitate, but realizes or actualizes these possibilities into a thing of beauty which in terms of facts may be a lie, but which provides a new focus of perception.

Man lives in a world of illusions, and only art can give him freedom from illusion because art claims no illusory authority and does not pretend to be anything else but illusion:

Art does not hurt us. The tears we shed at a play are a type of the exquisite sterile emotions that it is the function of art to awaken. We weep, but we are not wounded. We grieve, but our grief is not bitter. In the actual life of man, sorrow, as Spinoza says somewhere, is a passage to a lesser perfection. But the sorrow with which Art fills us both purifies and initiates . . . It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realise our perfection; through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence. (CA 1038)

And elsewhere Wilde says that "the aesthetic value of Shakespeare's plays does not, in the slightest degree, depend on their facts, but on their Truth, and Truth is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure" (TM 1071). The opposite of fiction is not Truth but fact, and it is the aim of art to universalize that personal Truth which can never be manifested in mere facts. The thoughts and emotions that other men have felt and can feel, the lives led by other characters, then, are all lives which the sensitive soul must live. Wilde proceeds to define the imagination as a sort of hereditary racial memory. We must know the past to know the present, and we must know others to know the self. Imagination, says Wilde, is simply concentrated race-experience (CA 1040), and whether it manifests itself through the purely imaginative creativity of the decorative artist or through the critical spirit, it is the same.

Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent . . . Then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment. The third stage is when Life gets the upper hand and drives Art out into the wilderness. This is the true decadence, and it is from this that we are now suffering. (DL 978)

Truth, then, becomes a matter of style, as Wilde says again and again:

Art never expresses anything but itself. This is the principle of my new aesthetics; and it is on this, more than that vital connection between form and substance, on which Mr. Pater dwells, that makes basic the type of all the arts. Of course, nations and individuals, with that healthy natural vanity which is the secret of existence, are always under the impression that it is of them that the muses are talking, always trying to find in the calm dignity of imaginative art some mirror of their own turbid passions, always forgetting that the singer of life is not Apollo but Marsyas. Remote from reality and with her eyes turned away from the shadows of the cave, Art reveals her own perfection, and the many-petalled rose fancies that it is its own history in a new form. But it is not so. The highest art rejects the burden of the human spirit,

and gains more from a new medium or a fresh material than she does from any enthusiasm for art, or from any lofty passion, or from any great awakening of the human consciousness. She develops purely on her own lines. She is not symbolic of any age. It is the ages that are her symbols. (DL 987)

Much of the above is now accepted as critical commonplace, but Wilde does not stop here. He follows his theories to their logical conclusion, suggesting that since the only escape from illusion is in the artistic lie, the greatest man is he who can not only create a great work of art, but can also form his personality into a beautiful and expressive work of art. If artistic principles can create beauty in art, why not in the personality also? As the artist gathers impressions and unifies them into a beautiful form or mode of expression, so a man will order his experiences and sensations to make his own life a mode of beautiful expression. The ultimate figure of such an integration is Christ:

To the artist, expression is the only mode under which he can conceive life at all. To him what is dumb is dead. But to Christ it was not so. With a width and wonder of imagination, that fills one almost with awe, he took the entire world of the inarticulate, the voiceless world of pain, as his kingdom, and made of himself its eternal mouth-piece. Those of whom I have spoken, who are dumb under oppression and "whose silence is heard only of God," he chose as his brothers. He sought to become eyes to the blind, ears to the deaf, and a cry on the lips of those whose tongue had been tied. His desire was to be to the myriads who had found no utterance a very trumpet through which they might call to Heaven. And feeling, with the artistic nature of one to whom Sorrow and Suffering were modes through which he could realise his conception of the Beautiful, that an idea is no value till it becomes incarnate and is made an image, he makes of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows, and as such has fascinated and dominated Art as no Greek god ever succeeded in doing. (DP 927)

Another figure through which this integration can to some extent be achieved is the person of the ideal critic, who uses the raw materials of art and his own personality to create a new and beautiful form.

The culture that this transmission of racial experiences makes possible can be made perfect by the critical spirit alone, and indeed may be said to be one with it. For who is the true critic but he who bears within himself the dreams, and ideas, and feelings of myriad generations, and to whom no form of thought is alien, no emotional impulse obscure? (CA 1041).

Consequently, the distinction between art and criticism vanishes, and although one can separate them for purposes of discussion, the process is the same:

Criticism works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful. What more can one say of poetry? Indeed I would call criticism a creation within a creation . . . I would say that the highest Criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing. (CA 1027)

The artist himself, says Wilde (CA 1020), exercises the critical faculty when he selects and chooses materials from which to work and a form in which to put them. It is to the critical faculty, whether in the artist or the critic, that Wilde then assigns the development of new forms:

An age that has no criticism is either an age in which art is immobile, hieratic, and confined to the reproduction of formal types, or an age that possesses no art at all. There have been critical ages that have not been creative, in the ordinary sense of the word, ages in which the spirit of man has sought to set in order the treasures of his treasure-house, to separate the gold from the silver, and the silver from the lead, to count over the jewels, and to give names to the pearls. But there has never been a creative age that has not been critical also. For it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself. It is to the critical instinct that we owe each new school that springs up, each new mould that art finds ready to its hand. (CA 1021)

Despite his development of the worth of the critical spirit, Wilde is careful that he does not develop the ideal of art for art's sake to the extent that art becomes merely another specialty in an age of specialization. Art appeals to the artistic temperament, but

the artistic temperament is universal. Care must be taken that it is the work of art (either the original or the new one which the critic creates) that dominates, not the critic. Temperament, a sense of beauty, receptivity, and sensitivity are the primary requisites for the critical spirit. Criticism becomes more a mood than anything else, and it treats the work of art as the starting point for a new creation:

The meaning of any beautiful created thing is at least as much in the soul of him who looks at it as it was in his soul who wrought it. Nay, it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvellous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age so that it becomes a vital portion of our lives . . . For when a work is finished, it has, as it were, an independent life of its own, and may deliver a message for other than that which was put into its lips to say. (CA 1029)

Wilde goes on to say that "as art springs from personality, so it is only to personality that it can be revealed, and from the meeting of the two comes proper interpretive criticism" (CA 1032). This does not mean merely that the critic's style will be personal or subjective. Arnold says that the task of the critic is to see the object as it is. Wilde disagrees, suggesting that Arnold saw criticism as expressive rather than impressive. An objective form, however, is not necessarily objective in spirit -- the difference is merely external. "Yes, the objective form is the most subjective in matter. Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth" (CA 1045). Commenting on Wilde's debt to Baudelaire, Barbara Charlesworth notes that the distinction between the two lies in Wilde's devotion to the personality of the critic:

Admittedly, Baudelaire had done much of Wilde's work for him when he established two principles: first that the thought of the artist dominates his model, and second that an artist must work with enormous fidelity to his craft. However, Wilde makes an extremely impor-

tant change in the theory by linking it with his own interpretation of Pater's impressionism. When Baudelaire writes of an artist's "naivete" -- his ability to express his essential nature -- he makes that nature a constant, perhaps the only constant in the artist's work. Wilde, however, like Antony Beavis in Aldous Huxley's Eyeless in Gaza, thought the permanence of personality "a very subtle metaphysical problem;" the "chameleon poet" thus has his counterpart in a Wildean "chameleon critic," but just as Wilde reversed the direction of negative capability, bringing all outside experience into himself, so he makes the process of appreciation "the record of one's own soul" and criticism "the only civilized form of autobiography," one which deals with "the spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind."

Nevertheless, any change Wilde makes in Baudelaire's theory is the result of a difference in emphasis and not in theory -- the outcome of Wilde's tendency to link the critic and the artist more closely than Baudelaire would have done . . .¹¹

Wilde's emphasis on the critic stems, as suggested above, from his conception of the endless potentialities of a man's soul. It is only the man who has created for himself a beautiful soul or personality that can become the critic-artist. One creates a soul by multiplying one's sensations or experiences, and Wilde suggests that the way to do this is to adopt a mask. A mask, like a work of art, is a vehicle for perception. Speaking of Wainewright in Pen, Pencil and Poison, Wilde says:

Janus Weathercock, Egomet Bonmot, and Van Vinkvooms, were some of the grotesque masks under which he chose to hide his seriousness or to reveal his levity. A mask tells us more than a face. These disguises intensified his personality. (PPP 995)

Both the artist and the critic show their souls through the mask of style, and this soul itself has been created by wearing masks. Such an approach obviously leads Wilde to seeing art in terms of form and style, although he does so to a lesser extent than more rigorous members of the art for art's sake school.

Wilde's interpretation of art for art's sake carries none of the overtones of an almost grim dedication to the careful chiselling of a line, the arduous polishing of a phrase. Wilde's doctrine is really

'art for the artist's sake.' 12

Over and over again Wilde stresses that aspect of art which reveals the personality:

An individual who has to make things for the use of others, and with reference to their wants and wishes, does not work with interest, and consequently cannot put into his work what is best in him. Upon the other hand, whenever a community or a powerful section of a community, or a government of any kind, attempts to dictate to the artist what he is to do, Art either vanishes, or becomes stereotyped, or degenerates into a low and ignoble form of craft. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. (SM 1090)

All art is measured in terms of the self, for "there is no art without self-consciousness, and self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one" (CA 1020). Wilde goes on to say that art depends on style, which in turn depends on unity, "and unity is of the individual."

The longer one studies life and literature, the more strongly one feels that behind everything that is wonderful stands the individual, and that it is not the moment that makes the man, but the man who makes the age. (CA 1021)

Analyzing De Profundis, Roditi writes:

When absolute individualism is thus identified with absolute universality or impassivity as an individual, self-expression is almost identical with the mystic's self-defeat or loss of self; and any esthetic founded on these principles must inevitably lead either to the transcendental inaction of contemplation which The Critic as Artist advocates or beyond it, to the final crisis, the loss of faith in both self and art . . . 13

Roditi goes on to postulate that after his release from prison Wilde had lost that sense of detachment necessary to art, and thus De Profundis is comparable to Fitzgerald's Crack-Up. Wilde had said that all art is artificial, and Roditi feels that it was the living of emotions too strong to ever become artificial again that was Wilde's downfall. In other words, he feels that Wilde had lost the power to make masks for himself. Whatever the case, it is certain that Wilde's

thought was always pre-occupied with the integration of the self and was heading in the direction of existential abandonment before the trial, for Wilde's emphasis was always on living life rather than merely existing.

The real fool, says Wilde, is not the man who does not know himself, but the man who is not himself, and the purpose of both life and art is to intensify both the knowledge of and the existence of one's personality:

Reason does not help me. It tells me that the laws under which I am convicted are wrong and unjust laws, and the system under which I have suffered a wrong and unjust system. But, somehow, I have got to make both of these things right and just to me. And exactly as in Art one is only concerned with what a particular thing is at a particular moment to oneself, so it is also in the ethical evolution of one's character. I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me. The plank bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes shredded into oakum till one's finger-tips grow dull with pain, the menial offices with which each day begins and finishes, the harsh orders that routine seems to necessitate, the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the shame -- each and all of these things I have to transform into a spiritual experience. There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualising of the soul.
(DP 915)

Whatever pattern of unity emerges, however, it must not be external. "Its symbols must be of my own creating. Only that is spiritual which makes its own form. If I may not find its secret within myself, I shall never find it." Man is everything he has been and everything that he will be, and consequently ultimate self-knowledge is the knowledge that the self is unknowable -- that is the final mystery. One can see in De Profundis the eternal yea, the final acceptance of the self as it is. Prior to De Profundis, however, Wilde's writings manifest a constant search for the knowledge of what that self is.

This movement inward, obviously, makes little of the external absolutes of morality. Wilde always cried for a distinction between

ethics and aesthetics, not because he did not think art should deal with morality (most of his own works are intensely moral in a reasonably orthodox sense), but because he felt that the whole work of art should not be judged by an irrelevant comment about one of its parts, and that aesthetic standards alone were applicable to the whole.

From the point of view of style, a healthy work of art is one whose style recognizes the beauty of the material it employs, be that material one of words or of bronze, of colour or of ivory, and uses that beauty as a factor in producing the aesthetic effect. From the point of view of subject, a healthy work of art is one the choice of whose subject is conditioned by the temperament of the artist, and comes directly out of it. In fine, a healthy work of art is one that has both perfection and personality. Of course, form and substance cannot be separated in a work of art; they are always one. (SM 1093)

From the point of view of his contemplative ideal, all art becomes, in one sense, immoral, "for emotion for the sake of emotion is the aim of art, and emotion for the sake of action is the aim of life and of that practical organization of life that we call society" (CA 1039). Wilde further rejects, in The Critic as Artist, the concept of sin as an external standard. He feels that sin, by its curiosity, increases the experience of the race and of the individual. The only real sin is the refusal to develop the personality.

The question of morality has brought me back to the problem of the nature of art, both in the creation of art per se and the soul of the critic-artist. The two are obviously related: a work of art is a mask through which a writer reveals part of his soul, and a mask is a work of art through which the artist perceives the world. A work of art is both the reflection and the creation of a beautiful soul, since it is better to talk about a thing than do it. (CA 1022)

Wilde's insistence on emphasizing the personality of the artist creates difficulties in his essays. For example, in a rather important passage which climaxes the proof of his contention that art

is not imitative, Wilde alludes to Marsyas as the singer of life. Now in one version of the Marsyas story, Athene discovers that she looks ridiculous playing her flute, so she throws it away. Marsyas finds it, and as soon as he puts it to his lips, it plays of its own accord, being inspired by the goddess. Marsyas challenges Apollo to a contest which Marsyas loses, and he is flayed alive. Although some versions do not state that the flute played of its own accord, Wilde must have thought so, for otherwise there is no point to his allusion. The point of the reference, and of the allusion to Plato's cave which immediately follows it (DL 987), is that art has no relation to life or reality. The allusion, however, implies that art also has no relation to the soul of the artist, which Wilde certainly does not mean. By alluding to Marsyas he must be suggesting that the artistic soul is dualistic. There is the sensual impressionist who absorbs experience, which the world sees and incorrectly assumes is the artist, and there is the critic, who orders what the impressionist has absorbed and in doing so makes no reference to the outside world. The impressionist, then, is the waking mask of the artist.

Apart from content, the style of Wilde's essays also manifests the qualities of the mask. It is particularly significant that the two most important essays, The Decay of Lying and The Critic as Artist, are both dialogues spoken not through Wilde's own mouth but rather through the mouth of one of the participants in the dialogue. The shifting perspective and the flippant style also indicate that Wilde was probably quite serious when he said at the end of The Truth of Masks, "there is much in this essay with which I entirely disagree." Oscar Wilde has been playing at being an art critic, just as Marsyas played at being a musician, with each essay a totally different song.

II

THE DIVIDED SELF

I have shown that Wilde advocates the development of personality through experiencing different types of sensations and emotions. I have also shown that Wilde's individualist philosophy eventually leads to his emphasis on imaginative form as a mode of perception. What these ideas mean when used in creating a work of art is best illustrated in The Picture of Dorian Gray. In one respect, this novel excellently illustrates the principle of the artist-critic Wilde describes in The Critic as Artist. Not only does the novel contain a great deal of Wilde's philosophy about art and life, but it is primarily concerned with exemplifying the formation of a personality in such a way as to make that personality itself a work of art. From another point of view, Dorian Gray can be considered as an exploration of the sort of schizophrenic personality illustrated by the "double" or "doppelganger" motif which, in its modern form, was first developed by Richter and Hoffmann, and later by Dostoevsky, Poe and Stevenson -- all of whom have written works which are frequently compared to Dorian Gray. It can also be read as a moral fable or as autobiographical fantasy.

One of the most obvious characteristics of the novel is the spokesman-like role played by each of the major characters. Just as each of Wilde's critical doctrines is a focus for probing the nature of the self, so Basil Hallward, Lord Henry Wotton, and Dorian Gray can all be seen as masks through which Wilde explores the nature of a single personality. Nethercot and others have considered that personality to be Wilde, as he apparently did himself:

I am so glad you like that strange coloured book of mine: it contains

much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be -- in other ages, perhaps.¹

Using the above quotation as a guide, Barbara Charlesworth² considers these three characters as masks which Wilde continually uses. While the Charlesworth approach is certainly valid, and is basically the one I shall use, it tends to play down the more interesting relationship between Dorian Gray and his portrait. It is this relationship -- the relationship between a man and his double -- which, especially in view of Wilde's inverted notion of the relationship between nature and art, makes it difficult for the reader to ascertain which is the mask and which the real Dorian Gray.

In other words, the picture and the man form two aspects of the same person, and one can argue that the real Dorian Gray is the picture and the man himself is the work of art. This sort of questioning appears in the novel itself in the second chapter, where Basil and Lord Henry argue about the portrait. Also, Lord Henry's ideas about influencing other people make it obvious that he feels he has created a personality in much the same way as the artist Basil has created a portrait. Likewise Basil is obsessed with the idea that there is more of himself in the portrait than there is of Dorian Gray. This whole problem of the relative reality of life and art is reinforced by the episode of Sibyl Vane, who is real as a theatrical character, but is never Sibyl Vane. It is only when she experiences real passions of her own that she realizes the unreality of the world she has lived in.

This central dichotomy of art and reality is more than a mere re-working of Wilde's theories about art and life. Dorian considers the picture to be a portrait of his soul, and consequently one can see the novel as a complex study of the relationship between a man,

his soul, and the creator of his soul.

Otto Rank, examining the literary tradition of the double, emphasizes the importance of this relationship between a man's soul and his body. In all its various manifestations, the motif of the double has been reasonably popular. With the Romantic preoccupation with the self, treatments of the theme came to be psychological.

Just as the subject of antagonism between brothers was typical for the literary epoch at the end of the eighteenth century, and the motif of incestuous love between brother and sister characteristic for the Elizabethan age, so it was in the era of German Romanticism that the theme of the Double was in vogue. The renewed interest shown then in the old "Double" of stage-fame, whose humorous entanglements with himself had become subjected to a psychological scrutiny by introspective novelists, cannot be sufficiently accounted for by their eccentric personalities alone. Similar currents in German philosophy at that time suggest that a deeper reason is to be found in the mentality of a whole period once more questioning the identity of the Self.

It is not surprising to find that this philosophic self-centeredness of the Romantic epoch appears reflected in its contemporary literature. In fact we find these romantic authors interpreting the theme of the Double as a problem of the Self, that is to say, they first looked at it from a psychological point of view. Their choice of the subject resulted undoubtedly from their own inner split personality, characteristic of the romantic type -- hence the conflicting and frustrated emotions of the romantic, a paradoxical type shaped by the repercussions of the French Revolution and glorifying Napoleon, who emerged victorious after it, as the ideal super-man. Once more man had become aware of the irrational forces within himself, the artistic expression of which he had to justify intellectually by subscribing to a new philosophy of the Self.³

After discussing several variations of the double in nineteenth century writers, Rank then proceeds to discuss the motif in terms of primitive conceptions of the relationship between the body and various manifestations of the soul, such as the image (in a pool of water, a mirror, or a picture) and the shadow. There are two basic

attitudes toward the "shadow-self:" it can be a guarantee of the existence of the soul and the life of that soul after death, ultimately culminating in the doctrine of the guardian angel, or it can be a precursor of death and destruction, manifest in various primitive superstitions and taboos against both the shadow and the image. The degree to which Wilde was familiar with such anthropological data that would acquaint him with primitive ideas is uncertain, but Dorian Gray certainly explores, in a nineteenth century context, this primitive and malignant relationship between the image and the soul. The primitive elements of the motif are even more evident in The Fisherman and His Soul, where the fisherman actually sends his soul from his body by cutting away his shadow. It is through his treatment of the Narcissus legend, which has an obvious psychological affinity with the doppelganger or "shadow-self" tradition, that Wilde frequently develops the theme of self-knowledge which Rank sees in the Romantic doppelganger. Wilde's works contain frequent references to both the legend of Narcissus and mirrors of revelation. "The Disciple," which I have discussed previously, gives a particularly perverse twist to the legend, as does The Birthday of the Infanta. In the latter, an extremely ugly dwarf dances before the Infanta, delighting her immensely. Completely unaware of his own ugliness, the dwarf misinterprets the Infanta's laughter, and assumes she is fond of him. Wandering about the palace, he enters a room of mirrors and sees an ugly figure staring at him and mimicking his every action. When he finally realizes that the ugly figure is himself, he dies of a broken heart, whereupon the Infanta cries: "For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts" (BI 247).

The relationship between Narcissism and the heart is also shown in The Star Child. The star child's body is white as a nar-

cissus (a flower Wilde frequently mentions in his poetry), and he spends long hours looking at his own reflection in the well. His heartless rejection of his mother makes him ugly, as he discovers when he again looks in the well. When the star-child, after learning compassion, is revealed as the long-lost prince, he refuses to believe that he is again beautiful until he sees his image reflected in the shield of a soldier. There is another mirror of recognition in The Young King, a mirror of wisdom in The Fisherman and his Soul, and important references to Narcissus in De Profundis (920), "Charmides" (769), and "The Burden of Itys" (739). It is obvious, then, that the Narcissus legend becomes for Wilde a sort of objective correlative by which he discusses the sorts of themes one finds in the doppelganger tradition.

Those stories utilizing the double motif to which Dorian Gray is most often compared all deal with the persecution of the hero by his double. The most masterful is Dostoevsky's The Double, which well illustrates the sort of split personality Rank refers to. The novel is obviously a case study in schizophrenic paranoia, illustrating the interior struggle between what a man wants and what he is -- how other people see him and how he sees himself. After Golyadkin's traumatic social rejection (the extent to which this rejection is real or merely a paranoic magnification is ambiguous) he imagines that he sees his double -- a vision which sends him into a complete state of panic. The next day at work he again meets his double in the person of a new employee with the same name and from the same province. No one else, however, seems to notice their identical appearance. At first the double is humble and seeks Golyadkin's advice and help. The double is very much like Golyadkin senior, shy, retiring, and desiring to fit into an uncomfortable situation as quietly and inconspicuously as possible. However, the double soon begins to manifest

all the traits and modes of behavior that Golyadkin senior wishes for himself -- he is aggressive, socially acceptable, somewhat sycophantic, trusted by the upper echelons of the civil service, and so on. He then begins to persecute Golyadkin senior, becoming more and more vicious as the novel progresses, his actions finally driving Golyadkin senior to an asylum.

Poe's William Wilson also deals with the situation of an identical namesake. The double begins to haunt the original, acting as his conscience or guardian angel. Even after their school days the double visits the original in his riots of gambling and dissipation, often forcing him to correct his injustices. Finally, in exasperation, the main William Wilson attempts to kill the double, but in the act realizes that he cannot do so without killing himself, or at least a part of himself. Here the double's role as a conscience has striking similarities to Dorian Gray. It is even more interesting that in The Oval Portrait Poe discusses the relationship between a portrait and the model. By painting the picture, the artist drains all the life force out of the model and transfers it to the picture which, Poe hints, has a sort of life of its own.

In Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde Stevenson emphasizes the fragmentation within a single self rather than the appearance of a physically similar double. The personalities of Jekyll and Hyde both exist in Jekyll, who finds a chemical way of releasing the Hyde part of him. Hyde is completely different from Jekyll in character, appearance, handwriting, etc. He is completely evil -- presumably representing Jekyll's repressed evil tendencies. Hyde's emergence and domination without the aid of the drug stresses the fact that Jekyll and Hyde are really two aspects of the same person.

In Dorian Gray the double is, as in The Oval Portrait, a picture rather than another person. However, the picture does take on a

life of its own, and, given Rank's notions of the significant relation between the image of a man and his soul, the identification of a double and original is more obviously explicit than in Dostoevsky. Wilde is also more obviously concerned with the dichotomy of appearance and reality, and consequently the portrait has a broader role than Golyadkin junior in that it is not only used to probe the depths of Dorian Gray's soul, but also is a focus for the whole art-reality question in the novel. Also, Dorian and his portrait are intimately bound up with Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton, who to a certain extent are creator or artist figures. In fact, considering the rather clouded and mysterious origins of Dorian Gray, one could almost consider Hallward and Lord Henry as parent figures, Lord Henry representing the paternal principle of order and intellectual influence, and Hallward representing the maternal or love principle. The principles of soul (or mind) and heart are two which become divorced in Dorian, and the tragic element of the work rests in their continued and ever-diverging separation. The art-reality, illusion-reality, mask-man dichotomies seem to stem from this separation -- in fact all seem to be different ways in which any strongly felt split in the personality is experienced.

That Wilde was concerned with the results of a sense of fragmentation between the constituent human elements of body, soul and heart is indicated in his earlier work, The Fisherman and His Soul. More obviously allegorical and not nearly so complex as Dorian Gray, The Fisherman provides a reasonably straightforward exposition of what I believe, is the governing concern of Dorian Gray.

The fisherman falls in love with a mermaid, who can never be his because of his human soul. Since the priest and the merchants are unable to tell him how to rid himself of his soul, he consults a witch, who tells him how to cut off his shadow. The soul then asks

for a heart, but the fisherman refuses to give it, saying it belongs to the mermaid. Three times the soul returns to tempt the fisherman into allowing it to return. The first time it offers the mirror of wisdom, the second the ring of riches, and the third the sight of the feet of a dancing girl. The fisherman succumbs to the third temptation, but he soon finds out that his soul is corrupt, and forces him to do evil things. Finding he cannot again cast his soul off, he binds himself so that he cannot obey his soul and returns to the seashore to call for the mermaid, who does not return. The soul finally wearies of tempting the fisherman, and asks to enter his heart, but though it receives permission, it cannot do so for the heart is so encompassed by love for the mermaid. Finally the body of the mermaid is washed up, the fisherman's heart breaks, the soul enters the heart, and the fisherman dies. After death the love is transmitted to the flowers over his grave, the scent of which so influences the priest that he speaks to the people of the god of love rather than the god of punishment and fear.

Wilde's notion of the soul residing in the fisherman's shadow is interesting in the light of Rank's observations about similar primitive beliefs, but the motif is common in such stories as the German tale of Peter Schlemhil. As in Dorian Gray, the soul becomes evil because it has no heart. The tale divides itself into two parts, the fragmentation of the personality and the consequent attempt to integrate it. The soul by itself has many powers, perhaps more than when fettered in a body, but because it lacks a body and heart, it is dissatisfied and always seeks to return. Even when the three are united, they are at war, with the body obeying first the soul and then the heart. It is only through death that the final integration is achieved, and redemption is indicated through the beneficent effect of the flowers, as the redemption of Sir Simon de Canterville in The Canter-

ville Ghost is also signified by the blooming of the dead tree.

Although dealing essentially with the same trichotomy, Dorian Gray is much more subtle and complex. Not only is it critically inaccurate to make a one-to-one equation between heart, soul, and body and Basil, Lord Henry, and Dorian respectively, but the question is further complicated by the introduction of the portrait and the nagging question of who is responsible for its creation. In the discussion of the theory of the Wildean mask, I examined the idea that a mask was something put on to extend one facet of the personality. It is my contention that the three central characters of Dorian Gray are masks put on to extend the heart, soul and body of Dorian. The portrait acts as a focus showing what goes wrong, that the mask of the heart, which Dorian is unable to assume, is only sublimated through the picture. Further development of this approach depends upon a detailed analysis of the novel as a whole.

Wilde has a way of rhetorically setting off bits of philosophical speculation and passing conversational remarks in a way that acutely foreshadows some of the tragic elements in the novel. An example of this foreshadowing occurs in the first chapter in the way Wilde characterizes Basil Hallward. Hallward explains to Lord Henry his refusal to exhibit the portrait, insisting that he has put too much of himself into it:

"Harry," said Basil Hallward, looking him straight in the face, "every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter, it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid I have shown in it the secret of my own soul." (DG 21)

The secret of his soul, as he explains to Lord Henry (DG 24) and later to Dorian (DG 93-94), is his passionate idolatry of his young model.

This idolatry, although it is intensely personal, is also very strongly connected with Hallward's conception of art. Dorian's beauty, for the painter, expresses new ideas. There are two things that are exciting -- a new medium for art and a new personality for art -- and Dorian provides both:

Unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek. The harmony of body and soul -- how much that is! (DG 24)

Already Hallward has hit on two of the major considerations which will emerge later -- the notion of the picture being a portrait of a soul, and the concern for the harmony of body and soul. It is interesting to note that, in masking his feelings in art, Basil has not succeeded. He feels he has shown too much of his love for Dorian in the portrait. Ironically, it is the mask of the beauty of this love which turns Dorian into a Narcissus figure who falls in love with his own image.

In Chapter 2 Dorian meets Lord Henry, and Hallward is careful to caution Dorian about Lord Henry's bad influence. Questioned by Dorian, Lord Henry gives his prophetic speech about all influence being bad:

Because of influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him. The aim of life is self development. To realise one's nature perfectly -- that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid of themselves nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of all duties, the duty that one owes to one's self. Of course they are charitable. They feed the hungry and clothe the beggar. But their own souls starve, and are naked. Courage has gone out of our race. Perhaps we never really had it. The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion -- these are the two things that govern us. (DG 28)

It is this speech, coupled with Lord Henry's obvious influence on Dorian which immediately follows, that suggests to the reader that Basil does not paint the picture alone. However, it is perhaps debatable whether Lord Henry is condemning himself here or not. Lord Henry certainly influences Dorian, but insists that he has merely brought out the real Dorian Gray. And from my point of view of the three characters being merely facets of a single personality, Lord Henry is correct. However, I do not wish to push my basic approach to the extreme. Unlike The Fisherman and his Soul, there is here no simple allegorical equivalent for the characters, and although in one sense Lord Henry is the physical extension of Dorian's soul or mind, he is also a character in his own right -- a character who is both Dorian's mask and who creates Dorian. And Wilde suggests that Lord Henry, though claiming otherwise, is forcing his ideas on a receptive Dorian, and knows it. In the second chapter the situation is still ambiguous. Wilde suggests that Lord Henry's words strike a responsive chord in Dorian:

With his subtle smile, Lord Henry watched him. He knew that precise psychological moment when to say nothing. He felt intensely interested. He was amazed at the sudden impression that his words had produced, and, remembering a book that he had read when he was sixteen, a book which had revealed to him much that he had not known before, he wondered whether Dorian Gray was passing through a similar experience. He had merely shot an arrow into the air. Had it hit the mark? How fascinating the lad was! (DG 30)

In the next chapter, however, Wilde is more definite. Under the guise of narrating Lord Henry's thoughts, Wilde says:

Talking to him was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow . . . There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence. No other activity was like it. To project one's soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment; to hear one's own intellectual views echoed back to one with all the added music of passion and youth; to convey one's temperament into another as though it were a subtle fluid or a strange perfume; there was a real joy in that -- perhaps the most

satisfying joy left to us in an age so limited and vulgar as our own, an age grossly carnal in its pleasures, and grossly common in its aims. (DG 41)

It is the doctrine of sensual impressionism, a doctrine somewhat modified from the conclusion of Pater's The Renaissance, along with Lord Henry's rhapsodizing about youth, which converts Dorian. But Lord Henry is not solely responsible for the change in Dorian which occurs in the second chapter. If Dorian is touched to the very soul by Lord Henry's words, it is Basil Hallward's portrait which seals his fate and makes him realise, or think he realises, the truth of what Lord Henry has been saying. In one respect, both Basil Hallward and Lord Henry have shown him himself. They have shown Narcissus his image, and through the rest of the novel the reader watches Narcissus drown. "Am I really like that," he asks, as he will ask later when the portrait becomes hideous. "Yes," he is told, and he is sad because the beauty and expression which are on the portrait are frozen and will die in him. Dorian's eyes are opened, in the sense of Genesis. He has become a creature of self-awareness -- a man. And man, in the Christian tradition, is a fallen creature. "How sad it is!" murmured Dorian Gray, with his eyes still fixed upon his own portrait. "How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June . . . If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that -- for that -- I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!" (DG 34)

Dorian then berates Hallward, suggesting that he loves his art more than his friends:

"I am jealous of everything whose beauty does not die. I am jealous of the portrait you have painted of me. Why should it keep what I must lose? Every moment that passes takes something from me, and gives something to it. Oh, if it were only the other way! If the picture could change, and I should be always what I am now! Why did you paint it? It will mock me some day -- mock me horribly!" The

hot tears welled into his eyes; he tore his hand away, and, flinging himself on the divan, he buried his face in the cushions, as though he was praying.

"This is your doing, Harry," said the painter bitterly.

Lord Henry shrugged his shoulders. "It is the real Dorian Gray -- that is all." (DG 35)

Dorian, however, recognizes that the picture is part of himself and that he loves it, for he will not let Basil Hallward destroy it. The change in Dorian is now evident, as the debate over which is the real Dorian Gray indicates. The debate poses a question that is never really answered, a question that the reader asks throughout the novel, and a question that Wilde emphasizes strongly at the close of the second chapter and leaves unanswered at the close of the novel.

"Is it the real Dorian?" cried the original of the portrait, strolling across to him. "Am I really like that?"

"Yes; you are just like that."

"How wonderful, Basil!"

"At least you are like it in appearance. But it will never alter," sighed Hallward. "That is something."

"What a fuss people make about fidelity!" exclaimed Lord Henry. (DG 37)

As the novel progresses, we learn the extent to which Lord Henry has influenced Dorian. Lord Henry has preached a somewhat perverse version of Pater's impressionism, the development of the self through the constant search for new sensations and the desire to experience passions as experiences in themselves, rather than concern for the object or person who inspires them. In describing how he met Sibyl Vane, Dorian confesses that he was wandering the streets of London in search of new impressions (DG 49), and thus we can conclude Dorian's complete conversion to Lord Henry's doctrines. The difference between the two men, however, is that while Lord Henry is the theorist he never, except in trivial things and through Dorian, converts his ideas into action: he is at all times the passive critic of The Critic as Artist. Dorian, however, has achieved a fusion of

intellect and body, and rules his life by Lord Henry's principles, often with drastic results, as the Sibyl Vane episode illustrates.

Sibyl Vane was attractive only through her power of illusion -- her power to assume the roles or masks of the great heroines of literature. This made her more desirable than any other woman, since she was many women in one. Her secret was that her whole life was an illusion. The illusory passions of the stage were the only real passions she felt, and this illusory quality is a large part of her attractiveness. She was never Sibyl Vane, never a mere woman whose mind could be predicted like her bonnet. Unfortunately, she felt a real passion for Dorian. This reality injected into a life of illusion caused her to see the illusory for what it was, and consequently destroyed her acting ability, her ability to create more illusions. Since it has been only as a creator of illusion that Dorian has loved her, his love is now destroyed.

It is here that the one-sidedness of Lord Henry's doctrines are exposed and one sees evil resulting from the glorification of sensations in themselves. Lord Henry purports to preach a doctrine of beauty, but he does not preach a doctrine of love, and without love beauty becomes ugly -- as the change in the portrait illustrates. Cruelty is not beautiful. It is Lord Henry, then, who to a considerable degree begins to emerge as the artist behind the altered portrait. That he himself recognizes his artistic role is indicated in a long passage where again Wilde takes us into Lord Henry's mind:

Soul and body, body and soul -- how mysterious they were. There was animalism in the soul, and the body had moments of spirituality. The senses could refine, and the intellect could degrade. Who could say where the fleshly impulse ceased, or the physical impulse began? How shallow were the arbitrary definitions of ordinary psychologists! And yet how difficult to decide between the claims of the various schools! Was the soul a shadow seated in the house of sin? Or was the body really in the soul, as Giordano Bruno thought? The separation of spirit from matter was a mystery, and the union of spirit with

matter was a mystery also.

He began to wonder whether we could ever make psychology so absolute a science that each little spring of life would be revealed to us. As it was, we always misunderstood ourselves, and rarely understood others. Experience was of no ethical value. It was merely the name men gave to their mistakes. Moralists had, as a rule, regarded it as a mode of warning, had praised it as something that taught us what to follow and showed us what to avoid. But there was no motive power in experience. It was as little of an active cause as conscience itself. All that is really demonstrated was that our future would be the same as our past, and that the sin we had done once, and with loathing, we would do many times, and with joy.

It was clear to him that the experimental method was the only method by which one could arrive at any scientific analysis of the passions; and certainly Dorian Gray was a subject made to his hand and seemed to promise rich and fruitful results. His sudden mad love for Sibyl Vane was a psychological phenomenon of no small interest. There was no doubt that curiosity had much to do with it, curiosity and the desire for new experiences; yet it was not a simple but rather a very complex passion. What there was in it of the purely sensuous instinct of boyhood had been transformed by the workings of the imagination, changed into something that seemed to the lad himself to be remote from sense, and was for that very reason all the more dangerous. It was the passions about whose origins we deceived ourselves that tyrannized most strongly over us. Our weakest motives were those of whose nature we were conscious. It often happened that when we thought we were experimenting on others we were really experimenting on ourselves. (DG 56)

This passage is important, not only in its illustration of Lord Henry's diabolical objectivity, but also because it dramatizes, in the theories Lord Henry considers, the division between soul and body. It is significant that the heart has no place in the system. Basil is the figure who manifests the principles of the heart, and it is Basil whom Dorian constantly rejects. It is Basil, the mask of the heart, who first created the portrait out of his love for Dorian, and it is not accidental that the portrait, in its role as Dorian's conscience, judges by the principles of the heart. Although to a certain extent he uses Lord Henry's type of language,

the following speech of Basil's indicates the sort of compassion Wilde associates with him:

Anyone you love must be marvellous, and any girl that has the effect you describe must be fine and noble. To spiritualise one's age -- that is something worth doing. If this girl can give a soul to those who have lived without one, if she can create the sense of beauty in people whose lives have been sordid and ugly, if she can strip them of their selfishness and lend them tears for sorrows that are not their own, she is worthy of all your adoration, worthy of the adoration of the world. This marriage is quite right. I did not think so at first, but I admit it now. The gods made Sibyl Vane for you. (DG 71)

It is after his rejection of Sibyl that Dorian notices the change in the portrait. At first he is frightened, and thinks it merely the result of a strained imagination. But in the morning the change is still there, and he realizes the truth of his earlier assertions that the picture was part of him. He immediately considers the portrait a part of his soul:

Was there some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms that shaped themselves into form and colour on the canvas, and the soul that was within him? Could it be that what the soul thought, they realized? -- that what it dreamed, that made true?

.
There were opiates for remorse, drugs that could lull the moral sense to sleep. But here was a visible symbol of the degradation of sin. Here was an ever-present sign of the ruin men brought upon their souls. (DG 81)

Dorian has again undergone a self-revelation, as he realizes himself a short time later. "The portrait would reveal his soul to him, just as it had first revealed his body" (DG 88). Dorian's immediate reaction, however, is twofold. He is afraid that his secret will be discovered and laid bare (for much the same reason Basil Hallward was afraid of the picture) and he is terrified of the thought that his soul is hideous. Despite his initial resolve to learn from the portrait and become good, Lord Henry convinces him that the episode of Sibyl Vane is nothing but an episode from a Jacobean tragedy, and

thus his fate is sealed.

"Don't waste your tears on Sibyl Vane. She was less real than they are."

"You have explained me to myself, Harry," he murmured with something like a sigh of relief. (DG 86).

And with the portrait safely hidden away, Dorian's reaction to it changes:

For there would be a real pleasure in watching it. He would be able to follow his mind into its secret places. This portrait would be to him that most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul. And when winter came upon it, he would still be standing where spring trembles on the verge of summer. When the blood crept from its face, and left behind a pallid mask of chalk with leaden eyes, he would keep the glamour of boyhood. Not one blossom of his loveliness would ever fade. Not one pulse of his life would ever weaken. Like the gods of the Greeks, he would be strong, and fleet, and joyous. What did it matter what happened to the coloured image on the canvas? He would be safe. That was everything. (DG 88)

From now on the question of which is the real Dorian Gray becomes acute, as Dorian takes over both the experimental role of Lord Henry and the artistic role of Basil Hallward and creates his own portrait, the picture still, as earlier, reflecting the soul of the painter. Dorian himself becomes recognized as a type of beauty -- and he considers life the greatest of the arts. He considers man a complex creature with myriad lives and sensations. The problem is that the sensualist Dorian has adopted too narrow a philosophy. From the point of view of philosophy (Lord Henry's) the true portrait is the man -- the thing of beauty. However, Dorian has also been created by Basil Hallward, and consequently it is the Basil Hallward part of him that judges the soul and finds it ugly. According to Hallward:

Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of

his hands even. (DG 117)

Earlier Dorian has considered that Lord Henry had the greatest influence in forming his life. He begins to realize, however, that his taunt that the deformed portrait is Basil's handiwork is correct, that both portraits stem from Basil's principles. Lord Henry could create neither, for Lord Henry has no heart.

Alan, it was murder. I killed him. You don't know what he has made me suffer. Whatever my life is, he had more to do with the making or the marring of it than poor Harry had. He may not have intended it, the result was the same. (DG 130)

By murdering Basil, Dorian almost destroys his heart -- it is only through the picture that we know he has one. And, significantly, it is only after the murder of Basil that Dorian appears to recognize what it is about Basil that has made him (Dorian) what he is. It is only after the murder that Dorian talks about the heart.

The murder itself can be considered as a symbolic rape of the heart. The candle Dorian lights on the mantle takes on phallic overtones as, after lighting it, Dorian strips the cover off the picture and reveals himself to Basil. Basil starts back in horror, then takes the candle and examines the picture. When he turns to Dorian he is in a cold sweat. Dorian symbolically crushes the flower he is holding in his hand as he sees Basil's reaction. Basil rejects the symbolic advance by dropping the candle and crushing it with his heel. He then begs Dorian to pray for forgiveness, picking as his text, "Though your sins be as scarlet, yet I will make them as white as snow" (DG 122). Dorian then stabs Basil three times, and Basil's convulsions again appear to have sexual overtones as the blood drips to the floor. What Dorian has done is reject the love Basil stood for and attack him violently. It is after Basil's death, after Dorian's total rejection of the values of the heart and its authority,

that Dorian undergoes yet another experience of self-awareness.

As with the other experiences of self-revelation in the novel, this one is accompanied by fear, first of being caught, and second of being murdered by James Vane. This fear drives Dorian to a further realization of what is wrong with him.

"I wish I could love," cried Dorian Gray, with a deep note of pathos in his voice. "But I seem to have lost the passion, and forgotten the desire. I am too much concentrated on myself. My own personality has become a burden to me. I want to escape, to go away, to forget." (DG 154)

He tells Lord Henry that the portrait is "Like the painting of a sorrow, a face without a heart" (DG 161). Lord Henry sums up the deficiencies of the philosophical system which has ruined Dorian when he replies, "If a man treats life artistically, his brain is his heart," and then drives the point home by asking the meaning of the Biblical quotation, "What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul?"

Don't, Harry. The soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought and sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned, or made perfect. There is a soul in each one of us. I know it. (DG 161)

Lord Henry sees Dorian as a model of unchanging perfection, a perfect type of what the world wants:

I wish I could change places with you, Dorian. The world has cried out against us both, but it has always worshipped you. It always will worship you. You are the type of what the age is searching for, and what it is afraid it has found. I am so glad that you have never done anything, never carved a statue, or painted a picture, or produced anything outside yourself! Life has been your art. You have set yourself to music. Your days are your sonnets. (DG 163)

Dorian, of course, realizes the unconsciously ironic truth of all Harry has said in a way that Lord Henry cannot, and this but leads him further to despair. He sees his beauty as a mask. "In hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness" (DG 166), and he decides to do away with the portrait and start life over again from the day in

Basil Hallward's studio:

Once it had given him pleasure to watch it [the portrait] changing and growing old. Of late he had felt no such pleasure. It had kept him awake at night. When he had been away, he had been filled with terror lest other eyes should look upon it. It had brought melancholy across his passions. Its mere memory had marred many moments of joy. It had been like a conscience to him. Yes, it had been conscience. He would destroy it. (DG 166)

In terms of Dorian's own death and physical corruption, and the restoration of the portrait, it is only possible to see the two as intimately interdependent:

If we examine the logic behind Dorian's hopeless violence in demolishing the image of his conscience, an act itself prompted by the conscience within, the necessity of the act discloses itself. Dorian wanted to get rid of the guilt attached to his past so that he could relinquish all duties and obligations, and pursue freely his affections for Hetty Merton (Sibyl's ghost?). Could it be that he has forgotten his wish? Now he has become the portrait in his ageless glamor while the portrait has assumed the lineaments of his human self, human in the sense that its face grows more distorted whenever Dorian commits a vicious deed. How can one exist without the other? At the start we have accepted the premise of imitation by the picture of the moral value of Dorian's conduct in terms of pictorial commentary. So far there has been no positive change. What this signifies is the failure of Dorian's nerve in endeavoring to arrive at an all embracing reconciliation, a marriage of self and its appearances. Finally death lends the ultimate oneness.⁴

I have been examining the novel by considering the three central characters as masks of a single personality. Before examining the cumulative effect of each mask, it must be noted that, as the novel wears on, explicit references to a masking operation become more and more frequent. Dorian, of course, recognizes that he has been wearing a mask, not so much creating one as creating a face underneath it, and he forgets that if he destroys the face, the mask will also die, and everything will be revealed. Lord Henry is also externally connected with the mask device. In the first chapter, Basil accuses him of posing, and Lord Henry agrees, suggesting though

that being natural is the most difficult pose to maintain. Later, in the episode of James Vane's death, Lady Monmouth, who is related stylistically to Lord Henry in that she is one of Wilde's female wits, concedes the loss of the button from her foil, but insists she still has the mask. For Lord Henry, a mask is essential, as it is for Basil Hallward, the creator of masks, in the sense that he is an artist. Though Basil reveals his own soul in the portrait of Dorian Gray, he insists that art should be objective:

An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty. Someday I will show the world what it is: and for that reason the world shall never see my portrait of Dorian Gray. (DG 24)

Basil uses a mask to hide his feelings, Lord Henry to reveal his, and Dorian, while desiring that the mask will hide the man, lives in mortal fear that the real face will be discovered.

I have suggested the intimate connection of heart, soul or mind, and body with the characters of Basil Hallward, Lord Henry and Dorian Gray respectively. Care must be taken, however, to avoid pushing an allegorical treatment too far, for the predominant influences of each are just that -- predominant characteristics. In Hallward and Lord Henry we have masks of the heart and intellect -- but masks, unlike allegorical automatons, have a close resemblance to real characters. The most accurate way of saying this is that Basil and Lord Henry (and Dorian at times) are spokesmen for various types of poses or masks which draw their inspiration from the heart, soul, and body. Dorian (in union with his portrait) embraces the other two, and when the whole novel (except, of course, for some of the scenes included merely for their conversational and witty brilliance) is read as an interior dialogue, a fuller picture of the different masks of Dorian emerges.

Basil Hallward, as I have already suggested, symbolizes the heart and its values, the artistic creator of beauty, and the creator of conscience. His role is summed up neatly by San Juan:

Compared with Lord Henry and Dorian, Basil Hallward, the other major figure, crystallizes the condition of a precarious self-sufficiency. Opposed to his secret passion for another man, the society of his time and its strict ethical code force Basil to conform to certain patterns of conduct. Consequently he acquires the status of spokesman of standard morality. He thus escapes his calling as an androgynous dandy by adopting the mask of the collective conscience. At times he assumes the role of chorus to the tragic complications of Dorian's life. He sublimates his feelings in art, thus separating morality from nature. He insures himself from being a victim of perversion by always yielding to Dorian and Lord Henry. His middle class attitude, as shown in his compassion for Sibyl's mother, proves the counterpart of Lord Henry's distinction of birth and mind, to Dorian's fortuitous beauty. His death implies the defeat of sentiment when faced by an absolute faith in art. If Basil practically introduces the novel to us in his capacity as the maker of the miraculous portrait, he also concludes the novel as a victim of his own creation. His existence images the complete circuit of Dorian's action.⁵

Lord Henry is the witty and satiric villain of Wilde's comedies, but his function and role is much deeper. He shows Dorian the horrors of old age and ugliness, he reinforces Dorian's egoism, he preaches the futility of repentance, and he provides Dorian with the book which triggers his search for new experiences in a world of sin. Although not sufficiently recognizing the significance of the creative role of Basil Hallward, San Juan has recognized the significance of the relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian in terms of the split personality:

From a wide perspective, Lord Henry belongs in the deepest sense to a symbolic reality. His idiosyncrasies, his methodical incursions, awaken the real Dorian Gray, embedded in the tissue of mundane superficialities. He is father to the Narcissus in Dorian that is caught within multiple contradictions; he affects radically the destiny of the novel's protagonist. But while he is the evangelist of sensuous perfectionism, his intelligence leaps forth with vigor, complementing Dorian's sensitivity. Dorian and Lord Henry together form an indi-

visible unity. From an allegorical standpoint, Dorian represents the experiencing self while Lord Henry represents the rationalizing self. Dorian acts, Lord Henry abstracts. It is possible also to discern in Lord Henry the intelligence of Wilde, in Dorian his sensibility. At any rate, the dichotomy persists and pervades the whole work.⁶

I have already, to a considerable extent, examined the nature of the portrait-man Dorian Gray. It must be stressed, however, that he plays a dual role in the novel. His tragedy is that he feels, as Basil and Lord Henry cannot, the tugging between the three aspects of his personality. His life is an attempt to unite his sensualism with the intellectualism of Lord Henry and the artistic vision and love of beauty of Basil, but missing, or rejecting, however, the heart which is central to Basil's vision -- an element which he does, however, possess and which haunts him.

Is he just a physiognomy designed for an illustration of a type? Or is he a created character with a palpable roundness of his own? By means of sustained interior dialogue, Wilde renders Dorian's most intimate confidences in set situations and tableaux. Dorian agonizes over Sibyl's suicide, he repents -- but only for a while. He discovers himself invulnerable to pity; his cruelty soon mars the portrait. But he does not aspire to the status of reality. He acts an ideal role in exemplifying a synthesis of sensibility and perversion, a rare yet plausible type. In other words, Dorian's character is a condition in which extremes meet; his acts signify the temporary triumph of one extreme over the other.⁷

The driving passion which ultimately defines Dorian's picture for him is guilt. Guilt, as Ojala and others have noted, is the one central theme which tends to permeate Wilde's writings. Not forgiveness, but punishment, says Wilde, should be the reward of the just man. In Dorian Gray, the guilt emanates from the inability of Dorian to integrate the three facets of his personality. By integration Wilde does not seem to want to destroy any of these facets, but to see them work in harmony. Dorian's quest for beauty is acceptable -- Wilde does not condemn either the sensual beauty or

the intellectual beauty Dorian finds. The crime is that to gain these he destroys, or attempts to destroy, love, which Wilde ultimately finds as the true type of beauty. Dorian has seized the other two forms of beauty in a way that forbids the existence, in his nature, of a beautiful heart, and consequently his soul is hideous.

This sense of hidden guilt points to another way in which Wilde uses masks. By unmasking characters, stripping away an exterior rather than building a personality out of fragments, Wilde is able to explore the self from a point of view quite opposite from that in *Dorian Gray*. Although Dorian fears unmasking, the masks in the novel tend to be synthetic, rather than analytical, as in the comedies. In the next chapter I shall discuss various alternate masking and unmasking techniques used by Wilde.

III

THE MASK OF THE DANDY

The Picture of Dorian Gray is Wilde's most complex treatment of the mask motif. Each of the characters portrays a different aspect of the human psyche by adopting an appropriate set of ethical and philosophical values. The conflict in the novel arises from the failure of the three resulting masks to integrate into a whole personality. In The Fisherman and His Soul death integrates the three masks, but the metamorphosis which occurs at the end of Dorian Gray serves rather to emphasize Dorian's sustained alienation from his portrait. Dorian's death, like that of Narcissus, symbolizes a failure to unite the image and the reality, or, in Wildean terms, the mask and the man.

In the society comedies¹ Wilde again takes up the problem of the relationship between man and mask. Dorian has been unmasked, although Wilde is reluctant to say that the mask is not as real as the man. In the comedies a similar sort of unmasking operates, although in a different context. Although the problem of integration of the fragmented self is still crucial, Wilde here abandons the threefold division of human nature he employed in Dorian Gray and The Fisherman and His Soul. In the first three comedies particularly, the problem is more directly one of conflicting values -- a stern puritanical innocence versus a cynical and witty worldliness. In these three plays the role of the puritan is played by a woman or women, while that of the cynic or dandy by a man, although he is invariably accompanied by a female counterpart. It is useful to consider these respective moral attitudes as masks, especially in the case of the puritan figure who must undergo an educative pro-

cess by interaction with the cynic and must learn to strip off the inadequate mask of puritanism. Except for Lord Goring, whose cynicism is obviously a mask and a deliberate pose, the male dandies are presented as rather static villains -- flat types rather than fully rounded characters.

The masking process in the comedies has a more complex function than merely dramatizing a dualistic moral conflict, however, for it is also crucial to an understanding of both the relationship between dialogue and action. Critics have almost universally felt that Wilde's society comedies manifest a great discrepancy between action and dialogue, that through witty dialogue Wilde tried to resolve problems that can only be solved through plot and character development, and that consequently the plays are somewhat contrived and certainly less internally consistent than, say, The Importance of Being Earnest.

The most important critical work on the society comedies is Arthur Ganz's "The Divided Self in the Society Comedies of Oscar Wilde." In brief, Ganz's thesis is that Wilde's three early comedies manifest the internal fragmentation of Wilde's own personality: Speaking in the person of his Philistine self, Wilde, the exile artist, admits that he has sinned in rejecting the mores of society. He insists, however, that he has remained uncorrupted at heart and begs society for pardon and acceptance. Speaking in the person of his dandiacal self, Wilde disdains that society and demands absolute freedom for the expression of the self. He denies the existence of evil and good and maintains that the only realities are ugliness and beauty.²

Ganz's argument is based on the "critical commonplace" that "Oscar Wilde's society comedies have foolish plots and brilliant dialogue."³ This dichotomy does not exist in The Importance of Being Earnest, which contains solely the dandiacal world of dialogue and not the sentimental Philistine world of plot.

Ganz notes that the three plays contain essential similarities in plot and theme. For example, in each play the central character is someone who has in his past a secret sin. The stock figure of the woman with a past appears in all three: in the first two she must be forgiven because she has essentially remained pure of heart, while in An Ideal Husband Wilde has made her the villain and Sir Robert Chiltern the sinner who must be forgiven. Ganz also notes that in each play there is a puritan who must be converted, the puritans being Lady Windermere, Hester Worsley, and Lady Chiltern respectively. The above thematic concerns belong to the Philistine element of the plays, and are played off against the dandiacal wit: This conflict is visible not only in the division of his plays but in the opposition of those divided parts. The Philistine and dandiacal points of view are more than different; they are contradictory. The Philistine may insist that his heart has remained pure, but he admits that he has sinned and asks society for pardon. The dandy, however, instead of acknowledging his sin, denies that sin exists and creates a set of dandiacal standards by which he indicts society itself. Where the Philistine is humble, the dandy is belligerent; and where the Philistine's defense is sentimental rhetoric, the dandy's weapon is wit.

But what is loosely called Wilde's wit is not all of a piece. Much, perhaps most, of it is truly dandiacal, and this is what we are concerned with. On the other hand, much of it is simple humor and is to be enjoyed as such.⁴

In his treatment of Wilde as a confessional writer, Arthur Nethercot arrives at a conception of a Wilde/anti-Wilde conflict in the plays which bears marked similarities to Ganz's approach. San Juan, however, tends to disagree with Ganz, suggesting that the divided-self approach looks only at certain aspects of the plays in isolation.⁵ San Juan defends Wilde's use of flat characters on the grounds that "one of the fundamental premises of comedy is that man, being finite, does not know all the situations that affect his life." He adds further:

This is perhaps why a more or less rigid classification of characters exists in the comedies; for in man's tendency to justify himself and his importance, he becomes obsessed with a certain quality or attitude. Eventually one can identify these obsessed figures with fixed patterns of action and response.⁶

San Juan also contends, unlike most critics, that Wilde's ironic wit is not out of place in these comedies, but is integral to the action:

Wilde's ironic wit has usually been regarded as antithetical to the moral questions and issues that he treats in the action of the play. Actually the total impression that comedies give is that of an integration of opposing viewpoints. It is as if a discordia concors has been attained in the structure of the plays. One example of this integration or combining of contraries is the reduction of manners to a game the moment the manners that form public conduct are subject to analysis. The comedies reveal the play-element at work in social affairs . . . The dynamism of verbal activity helps to liberate obsessed minds from the peculiarities that the laws and taboos of customary intercourse have brought about.⁷

While Woodcock and others deplore the division between plot and dialogue and feel that the badness of the three early comedies is accentuated by the cleverness of the dialogue, San Juan feels that Wilde's most significant achievement is his fusion of the serious with gay verbal wit; that potentially sentimental and extravagant dramas are improved as a whole by the intellectual energy of the dialogue.

San Juan traces very skillfully Wilde's development of the themes of comic self-knowledge and money -- largely through puns on things like the paying of debts:

Associated with this motif of "paying" and "repaying" is the idea of "saving" and "losing." Mrs. Arbuthnot, for instance, claims the "saving" of Lord Illingworth from the murderous rage of her son Gerald, who vowed to kill him after he dared to kiss Hester on a bet with Mrs. Allonby . . . She (Hester) has been saved from a dandy's rudeness but not from her shallow attitude of life, which has not anticipated such a violet act coming from a person with an elegant, respectable facade.⁸

San Juan also notices the significance of dress and politics as indices of social attitudes and values in the plays. Politics is a kind of fashion in its concern with public appearance:

In general, comic characters are those whose attitudes and outlook in life are out of proportion to, and so falsify, the actualities of experience. They appear ridiculous in the exaggeration of certain ideas and sentiments without reference to the flux of circumstances. They adhere blindly to limited positions, heedless of time and the potencies for growth and inward change in man. Wilde thus criticizes Mrs. Arbuthnot's bondage to her past. Her past is indirectly diminished in importance by the fatuous forgetfulness of Lady Hunstanton, and by the infantile regression of Mrs. Daubeny, who recalls chiefly "the events of her childhood," after her last attack of illness. Wilde projects the idea of life's development in Gerald's grasping of "my one chance in life," his "wonderful piece of good luck."⁹

I wish for the moment to postpone the question of the relationship between dialogue and plot, which is basically one of style. In terms of theme and action, the two important qualities of the mask raise first the question of character types and their relation to moral attitudes, and second the unmasking process, which is really a thematic problem of identity. Both of these can be considered together in a close analysis of the three plays.

Of the three, Lady Windermere's Fan has been generally adjudged the best. The standard interpretation, best illustrated by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Heilman in Understanding Drama,¹⁰ suggests that the play is about the learning process by which the puritan Lady Windermere discovers that her ideas of the absolutes of right and wrong are inadequate in dealing with the problems of life. This insight is gained through her observance of an act of self-sacrifice on the part of the apparently evil Mrs. Erlynne, which saves Lady Windermere from the very compromising position of being discovered in Lord Darlington's rooms by her husband. Her moral attitude then changes:

Arthur, Arthur, don't talk so bitterly about any woman. I don't think now that people can be divided into the good and the bad as though they were two separate races or creations. What are called good women may have terrible things in them, mad moods of recklessness, assertion, jealousy, sin. Bad women, as they are termed, may have in them sorrow, repentance, pity, sacrifice. And I don't think Mrs. Erlynne a bad woman -- I know she's not. (LWF 421)

She learns this in Act III and, as Brooks and Heilman suggest:

Wilde's main problem in Act IV is that his play largely ends with Act III. What is left is largely a post-mortem, which has few dramatic possibilities. Hence Wilde must squeeze the materials dry to make the act seem dramatic. Lady Windermere's basic decision has been made, and the only problem left is that her husband may find out about her escapade. But this is only a matter of possible discomfort, not a real issue; it is irrelevant, and Wilde could not bring it in without getting off the subject. Hence his toying with the possibility of Lord Windermere's finding out is really an introduction of false suspense. At the same time, however, Wilde ignores one subject that appears to call for treatment: why does Lord Windermere have no curiosity about his wife's change of attitude to Mrs. Erlynne?¹¹

Wilde's toying with whether or not Mrs. Erlynne will tell Lady Windermere who she is is also, according to Brooks and Heilman, part of this contrived suspense. The play then, is about the education and conversion of the puritan heroine, and the other two comedies are variations on the same theme, interesting only in the variety of their dialogue.

In an interesting and extremely well-argued article, "What Did Lady Windermere Learn?", Morse Peckham suggests that this standard interpretation misses the whole point of the play:

The play . . . is built upon the frustration or non-fulfillment of three of the most ancient and common theatrical plot-devices imaginable. Wilde has put it together by not completing traditional patterns. The disappointment of the encounter between the social rivals leads to Lady Windermere's flight. Her arrival at Lord Darlington's rooms leads to a false encounter between sexual rivals. And that in turn leads us to the major theme of the play, the disappointment of lost-child pattern in the non-fulfillment of the denouement of recognition between child and parent. If we look at the play from this point of view, we are led straight to the ques-

tion I have already asked. Put in another way, it is, "Why is Lady Windermere not allowed to learn the truth?" It appears to me that Wilde has unmistakably and most ingeniously forced our attention to that point. And if this is so, it is a mistake to say that there is really nothing left to happen in Act IV, as do Brooks and Heilman. Everything happens in Act IV.¹²

Basically, then, she has learned that she is capable of wrong judgements and that people are a mixture of good and bad. But, says Peckham, she has not questioned the standards by which she judges, for she learns to question only her conclusions and not her categories. Peckham points to her final scene with Mrs.

Erlynne as the true crisis of the play:

MRS. ERLYNNE. You are devoted to your mother's memory, Lady Windermere, your husband tells me.

LADY WINDERMERE. We all have ideals in life. At least we all should have. Mine is my mother.

MRS. ERLYNNE. Ideals are dangerous things. Realities are better. They wound, but they are better.

LADY WINDERMERE. If I lost my ideals, I should lose everything.

MRS. ERLYNNE. Everything?

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes. (LWF 427)

He concludes that Lady Windermere is not permitted to learn the truth because she has not earned the right to the truth, for her ideals are still the same and she is forced to live in a world of illusions. He suggests that Mrs. Erlynne is the woman of the subtitle, A Play About a Good Woman,

. . . not because she rescues her daughter. Any mother would do that under the circumstances. She is good because she has brains enough to realize that some people must be forever separated from realities.¹³

Peckham draws attention to the imagery of one of Lady Windermere's concluding statements as a positive indication of the correctness of his approach and as one of the best and most subtle touches in the play: "Let us go to Selby. In the Rose Garden at Selby the roses are white and red" (LWF 429). She is still an absolutist,

still an innocent.

Although Wilde's next two plays have not received nearly the amount of critical attention accorded Lady Windermere's Fan, one can deduce a general tendency among critics to consider them as variations on the same general theme of the conversion of the puritan woman. Both, this time with considerably more justification, have been regarded as almost pure melodrama somewhat relieved by Wilde's witty dialogue. A Woman of No Importance, which is certainly the poorest of the three plays, has received the most severe treatment. Again there is a woman with a past, Mrs. Arbuthnot, who unlike the worldly Mrs. Erlynne has withdrawn from life and lived almost as a recluse with her son. She revels in her self-imposed punishment and finds it very easy to agree with Hester's doctrine that evil should be punished equally in both the man and woman and should never be forgiven. San Juan has noted in this play more than the others a verbal identification between business values and operations involving money and ethical values. It is to fulfill his debt to himself and his mother that Gerald tries to make Lord Illingworth marry her. Hester intercedes, suggesting that she has been wrong, and that God's law is one of love. However, her conversion, as San Juan notes, appears to be unmotivated. From his discussion of debt imagery San Juan concludes that the central conflict in the play is that of feeling versus common sense. Lord Illingworth is the common sense figure, a man who has seen and can evaluate the world and the people in it as well as hold contradictions in his mind.

An Ideal Husband has also been labeled a melodrama. Here also critical commentary is sparse. San Juan finds in this play merely a further treatment of the forgiveness from society theme. Robert Chiltern is particularly interesting in that, unlike what Mrs. Arbuthnot believes of Lord Illingworth, he has in fact changed. San

Juan also notes that Lord Goring appears more humane than Wilde's previous dandies. Of further interest is the fact that this play is almost entirely a situation comedy, as circumstances govern the action:

In contrast with her tolerant husband, Lady Chiltern acts without regard for the variable situations of life. Sir Robert Chiltern, it must be stressed, conceives himself changed since his early indiscretion on the ground that "circumstances alter things." But his wife decrees otherwise: "Circumstances should never alter principles." Nonetheless, life's circumstances play a joke on her: when Sir Robert, in Act I, asks Mrs. Cheveley what brought her into his life in order to destroy his reputation and family honor, she answers: "Circumstances." Accident makes Robert negligent to the extent that he leaves the incriminating letter in Baron Arnheim's possession. And the accident of circumstance makes Mrs. Cheveley drop her diamond brooch, thus giving Lord Goring a weapon to prove her guilty of theft. On the whole, life offers chances to qualify, change, or confirm the truths and beliefs men hold. Sir Robert, for instance, speaks of the "wonderful chance" the baron gave him to enrich himself unscrupulously. Later, he would bank on the "chance" that some scandal might be found involving his blackmailer Mrs. Cheveley. Desperately he exclaims: "Oh! I live on hopes now. I clutch at every chance."¹⁴

The motif of the converted puritan again occurs, but this time the male dandy actually does the converting.

Peckham's interesting approach to Lady Windermere's Fan makes it possible for the reader to see a line of development in the three plays. If there is no conversation in that play, we are justified in asking whether in fact there is in the others, and if not why not? Perhaps the best way of examining this question is again through the device of the mask, which is developed in these three plays in a much more obvious way than in any of Wilde's previous writings.

The mask often reveals as much as it hides, and in the three plays under discussion, it does both. It is most useful to consider the moral attitudes of the characters as masks or poses. Consequently

the central struggle or conflict becomes one between the mask and the face. Wilde attempts to resolve this conflict by creating a situation in which the mask and the face complement each other, where the mask serves a useful role in social intercourse, but can be put aside when it is not required and other values are necessary. We see this sort of resolution operating only in An Ideal Husband, and it is my contention that only after creating a character like Lord Goring, who embodies this resolution, could Wilde ignore "serious" moral concerns and devote himself entirely to the mask of the dandy as he did in The Importance of Being Earnest. The basic problem with dandyism is the problem of Lord Henry's character — it is heartless. Lord Goring is the only male dandy in the early comedies who is not, and ironically he is the only one who is constantly referred to as heartless.

Lady Windermere, the first of the puritans, is actually more naive than consciously puritanical. She is a narrow absolutist, feeling that right is right and wrong is wrong, and never the twain shall meet. This proceeds, however, not from any wilful decision to accept such a position, but from naive innocence and a lack of experience in dealing with the world and the people in it. She herself is totally a mask, she lacks depth, and she refuses to see any depth in others, accepting everything on face value. She refuses to trust her husband, preferring to trust the gossipy Duchess of Berwick. She intends to play the role of the wronged woman towards Mrs. Erlynne, but finally refuses to insult her, not because of any moral qualms or scruples, but simply through lack of courage. In Lord Darlington's parlor she tells Mrs. Erlynne that she would have returned home in any case, but if this is true one suspects again that her motive is cowardice rather than any significant moral insight. Peckham's analysis of the play gains further credence from

the fact that the experience she has gone through is certainly sufficient to justify a change of standards. Were it not, one could perhaps argue that there is no reason for a fuller conversion and that Peckham is being overly subtle in his demands upon the play.

Lady Windermere's superficiality is also brought out by the familiar Wildean theme of knowledge of the soul. Everybody claims to know what sort of a woman Mrs. Erlynne is, but in fact nobody, not even Lord Windermere, she has been told more than the others, is able to penetrate her mask:

LORD WINDERMERE. Oh, I am not going to mince words with you. I know you thoroughly.

MRS. ERLYNNE. I question that. (LWF 424)

Informing Lord Windermere that she will not tell Lady Windermere the secret, Mrs. Erlynne is able to justify her above statements by fooling Lord Windermere into believing the dandiacal reason she gives:

(Hiding her feelings with a trivial laugh.) Besides, my dear Windermere, how on earth could I pose as a mother with a grown-up daughter? Margaret is twenty-one, and I have never admitted that I am more than twenty-nine, or thirty at the most. Twenty-nine when there are pink shades, thirty when there are not. So you can see what difficulties it would involve. No, as far as I am concerned, let your wife cherish the memory of this dead, stainless mother. Why should I interfere with her illusions? I find it hard enough to keep my own. I lost one illusion last night. I thought I had no heart. I find I have, and a heart doesn't suit me, Windermere. Somehow it doesn't go with modern dress. It makes one look old. And it spoils one's career at critical moments. (LWF 425)

In other words, she says she will not tell because telling would ruin her mask. Her mask has been stripped off, her secret, at least as far as the audience is concerned, has been laid bare, but she wishes to again assume the mask she has worn for so long. The mask she tells Lord Windermere about, however, is merely the mask of dandyism, just a part of her real mask. She talks about clothes and appear-

ances as if they actually indicated moral attitudes. Clothes become a mask behind which one can play a role. The obvious artificiality of her comments indicate a sense of contrived frivolity on her part -- but also an awareness of the fact that people do play roles and wear stereotyped masks. The resultant confusion between mask and reality is typical of Wilde. The attitude of the dandy toward masks is confusing, for while the dandy speaks openly of posing, this talk of posing and the atmosphere it creates is in itself a mask. That Lord Windermere is unable to sense this complexity in Mrs. Erlynne's character indicates that he does not understand her thoroughly.

To a certain extent then, Mrs. Erlynne is a female Lord Goring -- a dandy with a heart. However, she does not really come across as a comic hero, for any tragic elements in the plot are transferred to her by the end of the play. Wilde obviously took more interest in his male dandies, although Lord Darlington here is not completely developed. He has all the characteristics of the Wildean dandy: wit, a superficially obvious aura of evil, and a degree of perceptivity which makes him use his dandiacal pose as a mask to cover his own moral strength. That he is well aware of this strength is illustrated in the following interchange between him and Lady Windermere:

LORD DARLINGTON. Ah, what a fascinating Puritan you are, Lady Windermere!

LADY WINDERMERE. The adjective was unnecessary, Lord Darlington.

LORD DARLINGTON. I couldn't help it. I can resist everything except temptation.

LADY WINDERMERE. You have the modern affectation of weakness.

LORD DARLINGTON. It's only an affectation, Lady Windermere. (388)

However, apart from his witty dialogue and his general availability to Lady Windermere, Lord Darlington is not crucial to the plot, and thus cannot really be compared with the later dandies or even with

Lord Henry.

Of the three male dandy figures under discussion, Lord Illingworth most closely resembles Lord Henry Wotton, even to the point of repeating many of his jokes.¹⁵ While Lord Darlington has little or no opportunity to engage in conversation with the female dandy of Lady Windermere's Fan, Lord Illingworth's repartee with Mrs. Allonby to a considerable extent carries the play. Like Darlington, Illingworth is charming, witty, apparently evil, cynical, and somewhat perceptive, although he is mistaken in his assessment of Hester Worsley and, to a lesser degree, Mrs. Arbuthnot. Like Lord Henry, Illingworth is presented as heartless. This is not to say that he is an unsympathetic figure, but rather that the audience's sympathies are geared toward the wronged mother and her family, naturally at the expense of Illingworth.

San Juan is, I think, correct in suggesting that the central conflict or opposition in the play is between the forces of common sense and feeling. The problem is, however, that neither side can recognize the validity of the other. Hester is offended at the lack of sensibility and feeling in one so cultured and sophisticated as Lord Illingworth, who for his part cannot understand why he is so offensive. After all, he is perfectly reasonable according to his own view of society. This dandiactal view is basically an anarchistic one. The dandy conforms to the height of society in form, but turns its conventions and expectations upside down in his speech. Illingworth's problem is that he takes his dandyism too seriously and thus can respond only to dandyism in others. He cannot perceive feeling be it hatred or love, because strong feelings have no part in the world he has created for himself. In other words, he is the exact opposite of Lady Windermere in terms of ethical values, but in Wilde's scheme of things he is guilty of a similar crime. Although

his vision is fairly wide, and certainly not as superficial as that of the naïve Lady Windermere, yet he still is too superficial to see and act beyond his own mask.

The two puritan figures in this play, more so than in the others, are true puritans and hence somewhat distasteful, despite Wilde's attempt to make them sympathetic. As in Lady Windermere's Fan, there is no actual change or conversion. Hester may recant her stern doctrine of unforgiveness and claim that "God's law is only Love" (WNI 476), but she will not extend any of this love to Illingworth or the rest of English society, and one feels that perhaps there are pragmatic considerations in her change of heart. After all, she does want to marry Gerald. That Wilde goes to the trouble in Act IV of making Illingworth into a cad and a villain suggests that he felt a need to somehow justify the play's resolution. Hester can now forgive, but her forgiveness is selective, and Wilde is forced to make Illingworth unworthy of forgiveness in order to bring about any sort of resolution of the conflict.

The basic flaw in the resolution of this play is that it is escapist -- a continuation of the sort of behavior that Mrs. Arbuthnot has practiced throughout her whole lifetime, except this time under more comfortable circumstances. Hester does not propose a realization of and a coming to terms with the problems and realities of life -- she proposes to use her wealth to escape from life. Both Hester and Mrs. Arbuthnot have been wearing masks, the latter the mask of the righteous widow and the former the mask of the righteous American puritan. Mrs. Arbuthnot's mask of the widow has been stripped away, but to survive in her own moral universe she must adopt the pose of the wronged woman -- she cannot bear the thought that she may have been at least partly responsible for what happened to her. Consequently Lord Illingworth must be presented as

a villain, and is so presented in two scenes, the attempted kiss in Act III and the attempted insult in Act IV. Both are obvious contrivances and are out of character. A man of the world like Illingworth would certainly use more finesse in trying to obtain his kiss -- after all he gives himself a whole week in which to get it -- and also we have no prior indication that he revels in such insults as: It's been an amusing experience to have met amongst people of one's one rank, and treated quite seriously too, one's mistress and one's ---.(WNI 480)

It is only by thinking that Illingworth is a cad that the audience can sympathize at all with the outcome, as the only way Hester can reconcile Gerald and Mrs. Arbuthnot with her moral system is by convincing herself that her mask has changed, but feeling deeply within her heart that forgiveness in justice must be given to one who has been abused by such a man. The masks of both puritans are changed, but although the change is slight, enough reality has been revealed to force them to escape society and hide.

What Wilde has basically done in this play is to intensify both major masks or character types, the dandy and the puritan. In other words, he has dealt with greater extremes than in Lady Windermere's Fan, and has come up with a similar but more obvious ending. The puritan has not significantly changed but has been deluded into thinking that somehow she has.

What Wilde has been trying to do - with only partial success - in the two plays discussed above is bring about some sort of reconciliation between the two principles of dandyism and puritanism, or, as Ganz would have it, between dandyism and philistinism. It is my contention that he is able to achieve such a reconciliation in An Ideal Husband, chiefly by making the dandy more of a deliberate mask. As I said earlier, Lord Goring is the first Wildean dandy with a heart: that is, he is the first who is not a cynic. Mrs. Erlynne also consciously used dandyism as a mask, but according to her own

confession, did not realize she had a heart behind it until the evening in Lord Darlington's rooms. Like her, Lord Goring is labeled heartless, although he obviously has a heart. The heartless dandy in the later play is Mrs. Cheveley, who more than Lord Illingworth represents the evil, villainous aspect of the whole mask of the dandy. She is aptly set off by Mabel Chiltern, who, despite the fact she is not developed as an important character in the plot, still appears to have both a proper sense of proportion about things and a wit which is delightfully clever rather than cynically sharp.

Because behind her mask is the face of a thief (when Lord Goring finds her out he notes that she has "thief" written all over her face), Mrs. Cheveley tends to see all action as a mask or pose to cover evil. While there is a certain truth to what she says about poses, the wit she uses tends to make some of her statements ambiguously suggest her character:

SIR ROBERT. To attempt to classify you, Mrs. Cheveley, would be an impertinence. But may I ask, at heart, are you an optimist or a pessimist? Those seem to be the only two fashionable religions left nowadays.

MRS. CHEVELEY. Oh, I'm neither. Optimism begins in a broad grin and Pessimism ends with blue spectacles. Besides, they are both of them merely poses.

SIR ROBERT. You prefer to be natural?

MRS. CHEVELEY. Sometimes. But it is such a difficult pose to keep up. (IH 486)

She sees naturalness as only an affectation. People are not themselves, they can only try to appear to be so. In a Wildean sense this is true -- all his heroes who have come to grips with the world adopt masks. However, in Mrs. Cheveley's case there is a particular irony in that her "natural" behavior is not only totally unacceptable to society but is also evil. Since her past is still with her, she is a decided contrast to Mrs. Erlynne, Mrs. Arbuthnot, and Robert Chiltern, all of whom have hidden secrets. Mrs. Erlynne realizes that she must forget her past, that her attempt to come to terms with it by re-

entering society was inadequate. Mrs. Arbuthnot lives with her past, although she does not recognize it as past, as a memory, as something which has deeply affected her to the point that it has made her what she is, but which she can at least partially reject in the present, as witnessed by her rejection of Lord Illingworth's demands. Sir Robert, however, has changed. He is unmasked, his secret exposed, but behind the mask one finds a man who is no longer willing to compromise himself for power, a man who will give up his lust for power for the love of his wife. Mrs. Cheveley on the other hand, is still living in her past, for she is still a thief. She has learned neither repentance nor remorse, and while the other Wildean characters who hide secret sins reflect a mask of what they have become rather than what they were, Mrs. Cheveley's mask reflects neither -- everything is a pose.

Lord Goring also consciously wears a mask. He has all the qualities of the Wildean dandy and, perhaps more than the others, he is consequently misunderstood. He is accused of being evil, heartless, trivial, lazy, and selfish. Fine, he says, this is how I am trying to appear. It is obvious, however, both to the audience and to those in the play who take the trouble to heed him, that he is nothing of the sort. His dandyism becomes a way in which he can exist in a superficial world, appearing to be even more superficial than everybody else, but showing, through his wit, a deeper nature to all who wish to see. His is the classic example of the mask which reveals as much as it hides. Since Lord Goring's dandyism is such a conscious pose, he is able to put it aside when necessary, when this mask is inadequate in coping with circumstances. His ability to talk to the serious Chilterns and advise them, despite his trivialities, illustrates this.

Lady Chiltern, like Lady Windermere, is not a hardened puritan but rather an absolute moralist. She would rather be deceived

than have to hold contradictions in her mind (IH 520). However, unlike Lady Windermere, she is presented as more truly innocent than naive, and consequently she can change and forgive. She illustrates her acceptance of Lord Goring's advice, not so much through words as through actions, which illustrate a sincere conversion. She not only accepts Lord Goring's advice and refuses to allow her husband to retire, but she also confesses, voluntarily and without prompting, that her incriminating letter was written not to her husband but to Lord Goring. By the standards she professed earlier in the play, this behavior is impossible, but she has learned not only to give forgiveness and love but to receive and expect them from those who love her.

In fact, then, we find that the resolution Wilde has strived for in the two earlier plays is achieved here, largely through the efforts of Lord Goring and the creation of a dandy with a heart. It is a figure like this, a figure who can work effectively in both the Philistine world and the world of the aphorism, that provides the starting point for a discussion of the fantasy world of wit, as we see it in The Importance of Being Earnest. An Ideal Husband illustrates a fusion between the serious and the trivial, where dandyism becomes a way of surviving in a world that is trivial but takes itself seriously. But this dandyism must also be able to be serious when circumstances are serious. With a Philistine-like ethical justification of dandyism completed, it is possible for Wilde to move further into the fantastical world of the dandy and examine the mask of dandyism on its own terms. Thus the theme of The Importance of Being Earnest is not simply moral, but rather is one of identity and sincerity, both of which become trivialized and parodied.

Every critic of importance has noted an intrinsic difference between The Importance of Being Earnest and Wilde's three previous

plays:

This dichotomy between plot and dialogue which mars the society comedies does not appear in Wilde's masterpiece, The Importance of Being Earnest. But to achieve the unity of The Importance Wilde had to suppress half his nature. That suppression constitutes a kind of deception, for we are given only a part of Wilde's reaction to his world.¹⁶

The play, as Ganz sees it, is pure dandyism. Discussing the earlier comedies and moving on to The Importance, Ganz says:

In each case, however, the sinner is shown to have remained pure at heart and to desire forgiveness while the Puritan is educated to grant it and even to come to love him. Like the dandy, the sinner is an exile, but one who cannot bear his solitude and begs to be forgiven and accepted by the ordinary Philistine world. The dandy, however, glories in his alienation. It is the uncomfortable yoking of these antithetical attitudes that finally destroys the society comedies. To write his masterpiece, Wilde had to reject the passionate sinner with his admission of guilt and speak only in the critical voice of the dandy.¹⁷

Although this evaluation (especially regarding the earlier comedies) is somewhat suspect, Ganz's discussion of dandyism is particularly perceptive. He recognizes that the dandy is not satiric, for satire criticizes deviations from an accepted norm, while the dandy attacks the norms and institutions themselves. In other words, says Ganz, "the dandy is not a reformer but a subversive."¹⁸ He continues:

To call such a dandy as the charming and witty Algernon a subversive may seem at first unduly harsh. Algernon, one might say, is only trivial. But triviality is the dandy's disguise. It is, in fact, the traditional clown's mask, from the concealment of which he can say what he wishes without fear of retaliation. In Wilde's other plays the dandies are often openly villainous, but here, through the unreality of the situations and the delicacy of the language, Wilde has thrown a cloak of seeming innocence over a very sinister personage. Algernon's statements, then, may be flippant in tone, but they are not innocuous in content.¹⁹

The dandy, says Ganz, is the man of sensations, the man of the conclusion to Pater's The Renaissance, where all ethical values come from the self. E. B. Partridge suggests the same sort of thing in

a watered-down form when, commenting on Gwendolen's statement that "in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing," he says:

To be sincere is to be dull - a depressing fate for a civilized person. To have style, as the young people in the play do, is to be carefree, cheerful, witty, charming, and irresponsible: in a word, imaginative. The importance of The Importance of Being Earnest, then, is that it defends the life of the imagination in the subtlest of all ways -- by embodying it in a play so trivial and absurd that it makes fun of itself -- and defends it with the sunniest sprezzatura that even Wilde achieved.²⁰

Other critics of the play spend half their time discussing whether the play can be critically analyzed at all, and then demonstrate by the inane dryness of their prose that it cannot. Toliver and Foster both see the play as a farcical parody, knocking everything from social standards to dramatic conventions as well as the dandyism of the play itself. Reinert discusses satire in the play, failing to note Ganz's distinction between satire and subversion.

As most critics seem to realize but never really state, the key to understanding the play is the realization that it is totally verbal. Many suggest that Wilde invented a new form of verbal farce. If one can legitimately define allegory as extended metaphor, perhaps it would be valid to define The Importance of Being Earnest as an extended paradox. More than anything else Wilde wrote, The Importance illustrates all the tricks of verbal inversion of which he was so fond. The plot (San Juan suggests that possibly the play has none) is absurd and coincidental -- a travesty of the myth of the birth of the hero and the heroic self-discovery. Jack Worthing, like Oedipus and King Lear, asks the existential question, "Who is it can tell me who I am?" But unlike the heroic figure who knows his name and wishes to know his spiritual identity, Jack Worthing's spiritual identity is all tied up in his name, which he does not know. The pun

in the title, reinforced time and time again by the playing with the name Ernest, is further wrenched by the continued travesty of the whole theme of seriousness in life. The final inversion is absurdly complex, as Jack, who has been pretending to be Ernest but is neither Ernest nor Earnest, discovers that he is really Ernest, and thus assumes that since in fact (although not in intention) he was telling the truth, he really must be earnest. Spiritual identity becomes another name for seriousness, and since the quest for this spiritual identity is anything but serious, the play as a whole becomes a parody of itself.

The plot, as Ganz notes, does not give the normal Wildean treatment of the Philistine world, although, as he notes further, this world is very much present. The dialogue explodes and inverts this world at every line, so that when Philistine statements are met, they become indistinguishable from the mask of the dandiacal paradox. The Philistine figures take themselves and their approach to life so seriously that the extremes of their positions have become paradoxes and humorous witticisms in themselves, as seen in the delightful absurdity of Chausable, Prism, and Aunt Augusta.

The paradox involves a fusion of opposites or a frustration of the pattern of expectation of a cliché by either reversing the elements or by connecting two elements in a purely verbal way. The paradox suggests that the cliché is false since there is a considerable degree of truth in its reverse, that perhaps the original cliché is true but limited in its application, since the reversed form is manifestly untrue, and also that since both sides of the paradox are true, then, as Gwendolen says, style is the important thing. The aphorism becomes important because it has style, and it has style because it does several things at once, each mutually exclusive.

This is what the play is all about. The serious is trivial,

says Wilde, and then suggests that perhaps the trivial is serious. And in doing so he has not only trivialized his own attempt to say anything, but has implied that anything anybody says about his attempt is also trivial. The only serious thing that emerges from the play is the mask, the continued role-playing which all the characters perform. And even this is not serious -- the only serious matter is that roles must be played: they cannot be escaped. The will of the gods cannot be disobeyed, and the will of the gods is a paradox.

CONCLUSION

The Importance of Being Earnest provides, in one sense, a purely verbal mask. Plot and theme are minimal, existing solely to give a framework for the dialogue, and where they are interesting, they intensify the paradoxical nature of the play. In one sense Wilde is here anticipating the absurdists, although without a well-defined nihilist-existentialist philosophy his absurdity becomes humorous rather than pathetic or metaphysically significant.

It would be incorrect, however, to assume that Wilde's work has slowly developed towards a meaningless joke, for although The Importance of Being Earnest is certainly lighter than some of his earlier work, it is in no sense a trivialized version of what he has said before. A perusal of Wilde's works shows, as Nethercot notes, that the frequency of Wilde's overt references to masks and posing increases with the later works. What happens, I think, is that Wilde's conception of the mask changes as he develops. He nowhere gives a systematic theory of masks, but his knowledge of what he was doing in his own writing seems to be much clearer by 1895 when The Importance of Being Earnest was produced.

In the aesthetical essays particularly, Wilde's overt use of the term mask is surprisingly infrequent. What does occupy his mind there is the nature of artistic perception. He discusses this in a number of ways; first by claiming that the whole artistic process is basically a problem of style and perception; second by trying to abstract the critical or ordering faculty from the total artistic process; and third by trying to visualize the artist as a Wildean version of Pater's sensual impressionist. Art becomes the perfect mode of perception, because it can teach without hurting us (CA 1038) A work of art, then, is really a mask through which both the artist and the reader

perceive Truth. Like Pilate, Wilde is not too sure what Truth is, but he is certain that it is intensely individual:

Ah! it is so easy to convert others. It is so difficult to convert oneself. To arrive at what one really believes, one must speak through lips different from one's own. To know the truth one must imagine myriads of falsehoods. For what is Truth? In matters of religion, it is simply the opinion that has survived. In matters of science, it is the ultimate sensation. In matters of art, it is one's last mood. (CA 1047)

The above passage is not totally flippant, for Wilde is suggesting that absolute truth is unknowable, and what we call Truth frequently is only such because it happens to be the current opinion. The first half of the passage suggests a different truth -- a sort of truth which can be gained only through experiences and which cannot be expressed except "through lips different from one's own," that is, through a mask. Through experience, then, the artist develops his soul, and that soul is the Truth which is portrayed through the mask of art. In trying to perceive the reality behind facts, the artist creates nature, he creates a mask, through which, perhaps, both he and others can see. How wonderful it would be, says Wilde, if this artistic mask worked both ways; if by the same artistic process one could, like Christ, transform one's life into a work of art.

Life, however, is subject to time and decay, and Wilde would prefer to opt for the frozen figures on Keats's urn rather than the process of growth, fulfillment and eventual death of "To Autumn". Hence Dorian Gray's cry:

How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June . . . If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that -- for that -- I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that! (DG 34)

But the novel is much more than this -- Dorian is not merely a third-grade Narcissistic Faustus who sells his soul for good looks. The basic assumption behind the mask is that man's psyche is fragmented. Consequently, only a part of man, the mask of the moment, can operate at once. The more masks one can assume, the more types of sensations one can absorb, and the soul or face behind the mask will become richer. Presumably, the ultimate mask is the whole man -- the mask which is the self. This unified self, however, is not achieved by Dorian Gray, and in his comedies Wilde does not appear to be concerned with the problem.

The comedies tend to be analytic, where the essays and Dorian Gray are synthetic. Wilde is no longer concerned with creating the ideal mask -- he assumes that one must wear a mask, and then proceeds to analyze different masks. The first three comedies culminate in the creation of the ideal dandiacal mask of Lord Goring. Lord Goring's dandyism is certainly a mask, but it is flexible enough to avoid the constricting rigidity of Wilde's previous dandies. It is ideal because it is perceptive; it sees things as they are without being controlled by them. An Ideal Husband may be a situation comedy, but Lord Goring is the only character in the play who can cope with the situations.

The Importance of Being Earnest uses the mask of yet another level. Now that he has established a flexible form of dandyism, Wilde can explore the nature of the dandiacal vision. The main mask of dandyism is the mask of posing -- the dandy's continual statements about posing constitute in themselves a pose. Hence the dandiacal vision is paradoxical, circular, and therefore absurd. It is circular in other ways also. For example, Bunbury is a mask, the mask of respectability, which the dandy puts on, in one sense turning himself into a philistine. This circularity suggests that the problem of the

mask, like the problem of the paradox, is unresolvable simply because it is paradoxical. In other words, Wilde is caught in his own truism: "Those who want a mask have to wear it."

'Put off that mask of burning gold
With emerald eyes.'
'O no, my dear, you make so bold
To find if hearts be wild and wise,
And yet not cold.'

'I would but find what's there to find,
Love or deceit.'
'It was the mask engaged your mind,
And after set your heart to beat,
Not what's behind.'

'But lest you are my enemy,
I must enquire,'
'O no, my dear, let all that be;
What matter, so there is but fire
In you, in me?'

-- William Butler Yeats

FOOTNOTES

Introduction

¹Oscar Wilde, De Profundis, in The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, London: Collins, 1966, 412-413. All references to Wilde's works are taken from the Collins edition and are internally foot-noted unless otherwise specified. The reader is asked to consult the table of abbreviations on page v.

²Temple, "The Ivory Tower", in Edwardians and Late Victorians, 39.

³Hough, The Last Romantics, 157-164.

⁴Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker, 176.

⁵Charlesworth, Dark Passages, 53.

⁶Ibid., 61.

⁷Bullitt, Swift: The Anatomy of Satire, 59.

⁸Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Mask, 173.

⁹Wilson, Yeats's Iconography, 31.

Chapter I

¹Bayley, The Romantic Survival, 102.

²Richard Ellmann, "Romantic Pantomime in Oscar Wilde", Partisan Review, XXX (1963), 351.

³Peckham, Beyond the Tragic Vision, 24.

⁴Ellmann, "Romantic Pantomime in Oscar Wilde", 350.

⁵Since I am not concerned with the sources of Wilde's ideas but rather with the use he makes of them, I shall not deal in depth with the French Art for Art's Sake school, the succeeding Aesthetic movement in England, or the resultant variations on this approach adopted by Pater and Ruskin.

⁶Egan, The Genesis of the Theory of Art for Art's Sake in Germany and England, I, 26.

⁷Ibid., 26.

⁸Buckley, The Victorian Temper, 183.

⁹Ojala, Aestheticism and Oscar Wilde, 1,2.

¹⁰Peckham, Beyond the Tragic Vision, 173.

¹¹Charlesworth, Dark Passages, 63.

¹²Ibid., 65.

¹³Roditi, Oscar Wilde, 218.

Chapter II

¹Wilde to Ralph Payne, 12 February, 1894, in Hart-Davis, The Letters of Oscar Wilde, 352.

²Charlesworth, Dark Passages, 63.

³Rank, Beyond Psychology, 66-67.

⁴San Juan, The Art of Oscar Wilde, 67.

⁵Ibid., 65.

⁶Ibid., 64.

⁷Ibid., 66.

Chapter III

¹Since I feel that Wilde's first three comedies require a treatment separate from that of The Importance of Being Earnest, I have found it convenient to refer to these earlier plays as Wilde's society comedies. The terminology comes from Arthur Ganz's article, "The Divided Self in the Society of Comedies of Oscar Wilde", Modern Drama, III (1960), 16-23.

²Ibid., 23.

³Ibid., 16.

⁴Ibid., 19.

⁵San Juan, The Art of Oscar Wilde, 133-134.

⁶Ibid., 135.

⁷Ibid., 136.

⁸Ibid., 156.

⁹Ibid., 164.

¹⁰Brooks and Heilman, Understanding Drama, 34-82.

¹¹Ibid., 73.

¹²Morse Peckham, "What Did Lady Windermere Learn?",
College English, XVIII (1956), 12.

¹³Ibid., 13.

¹⁴San Juan, The Art of Oscar Wilde, 175-176.

¹⁵Arthur Nethercot, "Oscar Wilde and the Devil's Advocate",
PMLA, LIX (1944), 844.

¹⁶Arthur Ganz, "The Divided Self in the Society Comedies of
Oscar Wilde", 16.

¹⁷Arthur Ganz, "The Meaning of The Importance of Being
Earnest", Modern Drama, VI (1963), 44.

¹⁸Ibid., 45.

¹⁹Ibid., 45.

²⁰E. B. Partridge, "The Importance of Not Being Earnest",
Bucknell Review, IX (1960), 158.

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